



Around the World in 80 Dates

By Jennifer Cox

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Editorial Review

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CHAPTER ONE

This Time Last Year

Settling into a steady rhythm of drinking, crying, drinking, crying, I became aware of the music for the first time: '*Stand by your man, give him two arms to cling to . . .*' I glared at the radio: I've always hated that song. My feeling was that if the only way a man can remain standing upright is by leaning heavily on you, surely it's best just to let him fall right on over. But since today was the day I'd discovered Kelly had been cheating on me for pretty much the five years we'd been together, I let out a long, ragged sigh: too exhausted to cry any more. It was also the day I had to accept that maybe there's a little bit of Tammy in us all? I really loved Kelly. Which was surprising because he actually wasn't that loveable. He was very sexy – one of those dark, brooding types, with piercing green eyes and a tangle of curly black hair. He was tall and strong, with a gentle mouth and a chest broad enough to do a week's ironing on. But he was also self-centred, secretive and moody. The kind of guy who sits in the corner of a bar, smouldering over a beer and a shot. For some reason I was drawn to 'the difficult ones', and Kelly was as difficult as they came. A man who would sooner eat broken glass than tell you where he'd been, what his plans were or if he loved you. I have no idea why I kept trying: when he'd wanted to go to parties on his own; stayed out late; kept a phone number with just an initial next to it . . . In fact, for some reason it made me try harder. Over our five years together, as Kelly morphed into Clint Eastwood, I increasingly turned into Coco the Clown, pulling out all the stops to entertain him, make him feel involved, get his attention. I did the emotional equivalent of driving a small red pedal car around the ring of our relationship, frantically parping on my little horn as bunches of flowers popped out my shirt and small men in orange wigs, emptied buckets of custard down my trousers and twanged my big red nose. It was not dignified. And, ultimately, it was pointless. I knew in my heart we would only ever share a 'now'. Never a future. Then I rang the number with the initial next to it, and our 'now' was over.

As soon as I split up with Kelly I went straight to the airport and got on a plane to New York City. The experience of being in New York is like stroking a man-eating tiger: as much as it scares the bejesus out of you, for those moments it allows you to touch it, you know you are blessed and immortal.

And on this occasion, like every other I'd been there, New York uplifted me. I lost myself in the markets, boutiques and coffee shops around Greenwich Village and Harlem, whacked softballs in the batting cages over on Coney Island until my arms sang. Being in the city didn't cure my heartache but it distracted me and stopped it getting worse, and for that I was grateful.

I actually had to be in New York for work, so in a way it was good timing (if such a thing exists when you're talking about splitting up with your boyfriend). But then again, I worked in the travel industry so it wasn't that unusual for me to be heading off somewhere. I loved travelling and had been determined to get a job in the industry from the moment I discovered its unerring ability to make me feel really good.

This was especially true after an ugly break-up. Some say that time is a great healer, but I discovered years ago that it's actually travel that quite literally moves you on. Staying on the crime scene of an awful break-up is the worst thing you can do: too many painful memories and reminders. I subscribe to the 'pack up your troubles' school of relationship recovery, and let me tell you, it works. It had been almost by accident that I'd learnt travel mends a broken heart. I was 18 and William was the first big love of my life. We were at school

together and shared the kind of pure and trusting love only possible when you have yet to experience that first deep cut. When William dumped me out of the blue for Melanie (a girl who shopped at Miss Selfridge, who had never even been to Glastonbury), I was completely unprepared for the shock. I spent that whole summer after my A levels moping around: crying on my best friend Belinda's shoulder, making her come for long walks so I could tell her (again) how awful it was and how I was never going to get over it. But when, at the end of summer, I left home for Leeds University, I was really surprised to discover that out of sight really was out of mind. Here I was in a whole new place, with no painful memories. There was no danger of bumping into Will and Mel in Leeds, I didn't have to go to *our* places on my own or have people drop into conversation that they'd all been out together the night before. So, free from constant reminders of my old Will and his new girlfriend, I got over him and on with my life.

All thanks to the M1 and National Express coaches. But my lesson in the healing power of travel didn't end there. It was my next boyfriend who taught me that travel makes things easier for the dumper (as opposed to the dumpee) too. Peter was the guitarist in a band I sang with in Leeds, and we lived together for most of my time at university. He was gentle, kind and very cute. But sadly, as time went on, it became increasingly clear that 'gentle and kind' weren't enough. I really didn't want to hurt him – Peter didn't deserve that, plus I remembered how bad it felt – but as much as I loved him, I felt restless and the need to move on. But I couldn't end it. I really tried: I'd psych myself up, telling myself I was going through with it this time, but at the last minute I'd think about how upset Peter would be and I'd lose my nerve. Actually, a couple of times I did end it, but Peter persuaded me to give us another chance. I was hopeless: I just couldn't face his heartache and make a clean break. Until I went to Australia.

It was one of those whimsical decisions that only makes sense after you've done it. I'd just graduated from university and had no idea what I wanted to do next. Going to Australia on my own for three months suddenly seemed the perfect solution: it would be both an adventurous challenge and the chance to think everything through.

So I flew into Perth, Western Australia. And virtually the first thing I did when I arrived was to call Peter and split up with him. As crazy as it sounds, I needed to go to the other side of the world to do it: I wasn't there to watch him fall apart, knowing it was my fault and still caring about him. And because I didn't feel wracked with the guilt I would have felt at home, I got over it far more quickly (as did he). I was free to fall madly in love with Australia and I stayed, travelling all over Australasia for the next six years.

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I think I have to be honest at this point and confess it wasn't only Australia I fell madly in love with. I might have been Peter's girlfriend when I flew into Australia, but six months after arriving I was Philip's wife.

I'd been in Australia for two weeks when I met Philip. He worked at a theatre company where I'd landed a job, and it was love at first sight. A spellbinding, charismatic, risk-all Outback Romeo, I immediately recognised Philip as one of my Soul Mates. (Well, cats have nine lives, who's to say we are limited to a single, solitary Soul Mate?) He wasn't afraid of anything and when I was with him, life was exciting and full of possibilities. We fell deeply and passionately in love. Although we got married very quickly, we *clicked* so powerfully together it felt the natural and right thing to do. Neither of us had really done much travelling, so we set off to explore, experience and discover together. We spent six months driving through the hot, red Outback in an old Holden panel van, living on wild fruit, swimming with dolphins, wrestling with spiders. We trekked through craggy outposts of India and Nepal, spent weekends snorkelling in the coral-studded waters around Vanuatu and the Solomons, took crazy surf-trips to Bali and sailed boats down the muddy Mekong in Vietnam. It was amazing. And in the end, maybe that was the problem: man cannot live on thrill alone. After six years of wonder and discovery I was all amazed out. I'd had one brief visit home in all that

time. I missed my family and friends; I missed normal old England. I missed Marks & Spencer's crisps; I longed to sit in a pub on a damp autumn day (Australia doesn't do seasons) and pretend I cared about football; I was desperate for a colourful argument about politics and the chance to browse through some decent weekend papers ('man leaves change on milk-bar counter' was about the level of reporting in Australia). It was time to come home, and as much as I loved Philip, he was a creature of the Outback. Beautiful, passionate and wild, he had – and wanted – no place in Britain, with its crowds, traffic, litter and drizzle. I went to Australia alone. Six years later, I returned home the same way.

It's been a year now since Kelly and I split up, and thankfully I'm past the I'll Never Fall in Love Again stage. I spent a lot of time thinking about why we stayed together for as long as we did: also trying to work out how I could avoid making the same mistakes again. And after that year going over past choices and future options, I learnt two things. Firstly, anyone who wants to know anything about Cher or Def Leppard should tune into VH1 at 3 a.m. Secondly, trying to find even a halfway decent boyfriend in London is a total nightmare. If you knew the latter, chances are you've already discovered the former? Londoners have the longest working hours in Europe, and the highest number of stress-related diseases to prove it. It's hardly the setting for a romantic Barry White-type encounter – *You're my First, You're my Last, You're my Intray?* – yet precisely because we spend the majority of our time in the office, inevitably this is where we're hoping to meet Mr Right. And failing to find him. Manners may maketh the man, but work unmaketh him pretty damn quick. It used to be exciting meeting someone in the office, but nowadays it means sifting through a pack of lifeless men so stressed and depressed the only relationships they have the energy or confidence for are with their laptops and their lads mags. And we SIWWIDs (Single Income Women, Working Instead of Dating) have bought into the whole 'mustn't try harder' myth: that being successful at work and having fun with our friends makes us independent and therefore unattractive to men. This really isn't the case: it's simply that the office – all floppy discs and soft launches – is not the place to find a satisfying relationship. Ten years ago when I moved from Australia back to England, I had to accept the sad truth that my marriage wasn't moving back with me. But I knew my love affair with travel was a relationship that would flourish wherever I went, so I lost no time getting a job in the travel industry. I became Spokesperson and Head of PR for guidebook company Lonely Planet Publications, as well as a travel writer and presenter for the BBC.

And as I travelled to and from my office in London, and to and from my work overseas, I was struck by how much more interested in women foreign men are, compared with British men. At times it felt as if you couldn't find a decent date in London to save your life, the bar being so low now that I mean any man who knows how to use a fork and possesses a matching pair of shoes, but you virtually have to fight them off with a stick in every other capital city around the world. I don't want to sound like an international slapper here, and I'm not even vaguely god's gift – I don't have Kylie's bum or Melanie Griffiths' lips . . . though to be fair, neither does she. But it is so much easier to meet men when you're abroad. Walk down the street in any other country and there'll always be men checking you out, coming over, chatting you up. In London, the only guys that make eye contact with you are the inmates on the Northern Line. I'm not saying British men are totally to blame: we women have to take some of the responsibility too. There are only so many hours in the day, and chances are that if you have a successful career it's your job that takes up most of them. As the economy flourishes are we in the grip of an emotional recession? Have we made our jobs the primary relationships in our lives, settling for a so-so boyfriend because that's all we have the time to either find or maintain?

I say *we*, but of course I mean *me*. Had I loved my job more than I loved my boyfriend? By putting in and getting back so much from my career, how much did I have left to give Kelly? And how much did I really need from him in return? If I had needed Kelly more, would I have been forced to accept that the relationship sucked sooner and saved myself from going through 'Jen and Kel – The Crap Years'? I know this sounds terrible, but is it really possible to have a great relationship and a great job? And if not, which would you choose?

And to get back to talking about me again (oh, go on), if I was right and all the *great relationships* were wandering down high streets in every country other than the one in which I lived, what was I going to do about it?

Before we go any further, I think we need to take a moment to discuss terms. It's important to clarify exactly what I mean by *great relationships*. What I'm not talking about is a shag. One-night stands are the emotional kebabs of the relationship world: easy to get after the pubs close, leaving you feeling rubbish for the next three days. No, I'm talking about meeting someone I actually like and want to get to know. Someone who makes me laugh, reads me bits out the newspaper, will nip out for tampons, lets me cut his hair (badly, once), has a bath while I sit on the loo seat cutting my/his toenails. Someone I'm willing to introduce my friends to. I'm talking about a Soul Mate. And I'm completely serious when I say I don't believe he exists here in London.

If you think I'm being harsh and haven't given locals enough of a chance, or perhaps you're new to London and are considering the perilous climb up Mount True Love yourself, I'll outline the options. There are a number of well and wearily trodden paths to a new man. Your friends unconsciously reveal what they really think of you by the kind of '*someone I thought you'd like to meet*' man brought to dinner parties. Rather than catching up on your paperwork, you could squeeze in some '*best of a bad lot*' power-flirting on the commute to work (and be gutted when, even though you didn't fancy them to begin with, your *focus* knocks you back). Maybe you're considering signing up for online dating or going to places where you should, but absolutely never will, meet someone suitable? Since over the last year I've tried them all, I'll share what I've learnt with you. I've sat chatting to Belgian lawyers in Starbucks (willing them to be even a little more interesting); I've dabbled with online dating (where all the guys have done the *Nick Hornby's Guide to Women* course and are single parents with angelic but troubled kids, or run small, quirky yet failing businesses). I don't even want to think about going to another cultural event (to meet graduates of the *Tony Parsons' Guide to Women* course: bitterness over ex-wife, partially concealed by exterior of witty self-loathing, which in turn is momentarily obscured by an encyclopaedic knowledge of early punk bands). Maybe you can tell me about evening classes? I can't work out whether eligible guys need to do *Woodwork 101* or if the classes will just be full of women like me. Likewise, I haven't signed up for a 14-week religious or spiritual workshop and I won't go near any therapy that involves garden hoses, buckets or splash mats. I'm not looking to discover the meaning of life. Get karmic social services on to me, because I'm really not interested in my inner child. I just want a decent boyfriend. And by all means share your experiences with your girlfriends, but I am completely serious when I say that the actual task of searching for your Soul Mate, like getting your bikini line waxed, is strictly a one-woman job. It's a selfish, solo occupation that can't involve all your other single female friends. When too many of us in relationship recovery get together, new boyfriends are the last things on our minds. Instead we perpetuate and mythologise our misery, building a shrine to our exes out of empty wine bottles and Kettle Chip packets. I don't want to talk about old relationships. I don't want to spend months trying to understand what went wrong. If your car plunged through the central reservation of the motorway, you wouldn't spend a year showing your friends photos of the happy days when it was safely parked outside your house. You'd just go out and buy another one. Get right back into the fast lane. Move on.

But we're so busy working, we don't have the time to find the person we want to *move on* with. So we turn to the *labour-saving devices* on the market, designed to lead us to Mr Right in the small amount of time we have allocated to the task. A perfect example of this is online dating. Online dating seems convenient because you can do it surreptitiously from your desk, during meetings at work or with flirtatious, drunken abandon when you get home in the early hours of Saturday morning. That's pretty much where the convenience ends, though, because no matter how good the profile and nice the picture, you need to know more about them before deciding if they're worth meeting. So, you chat back and forth via email, maybe send a text message or two, then you're ready to talk on the phone. The first physical contact (i.e. ear-to-ear)

is crunch-time since you can generally tell from their voice and conversation if you want to meet them or not. Unfortunately, it's generally 'not', but by this point you're involved with them and finding a reason to end that involvement – even though you don't know them – is cringingly hard (tip: keep a fictitious 'unresolved ex' up your sleeve for these occasions). Hope turns to guilt as you become locked into a continuous and exhausting process of assessing candidates, like interviewing people for a job you know they'll never get. And in the meantime, that's another two hours a day spent in front of your computer. Something has to change. Enough of these *relationship patches*, which, like nicotine patches, stave off the need without satisfying any of the desire. I wanted a fantastic, glorious, wonderful relationship. Otherwise, what's the point?

But for this to happen, I knew I needed to make a better job of meeting Mr Right. I felt I'd tried everything in London. Maybe it was time for a more radical and far-reaching solution?

Rather than travelling to recover from Mr Wrong, what if I went travelling to find Mr Right? I mean, I was sure Fate had him out there waiting for me, so why was I wasting time in London moaning when I could be out in the world searching? I'd put my heart and soul into my job: maybe it was time I put the same amount of effort into my love life.

So, after some soul-searching I quit my job at Lonely Planet. I had a new job now: finding my Soul Mate.

The business and management skills I'd developed over the years would most likely come in handy. Making programmes for the BBC has honed my research and interviewing skills. Setting up and running Lonely Planet's European publicity and promotional operations meant devising campaigns whilst jumping on and off planes to oversee launches, train staff, plus doing a ton of interviews and public speaking stints. Like anybody with a big, fat job, to do this well I'd had to be able to network, research, talk people into doing things they weren't that keen on, time-manage, meet deadlines, budget and plan.

So, travelling would be the answer to London's dearth of suitable men, and my professional skills would hopefully lead me to possible candidates, eliminating the unsuitable, undesirable and unstable from amongst them. But where should I start looking? I couldn't just get off a plane in another country shouting: '*Soul Mate, I'm here. Come and get me.*' I was confident Fate had a number of them out there for me to meet (as I've already said, I believe we have more than one), but where, and who could they be?

I decided that the first step to answering this question was to work out who they *had* been. If finding my Soul Mate was now my job, like any other job I'd need to put together an up-to-date résumé. A Relationship Résumé: a document that set out my romance history, giving me an insight into the kind of person I'd gone for in the past. In short, who I dated and when; the role I undertook in the relationship and the reasons for leaving it. Based on that, I then needed to write a Soul Mate Job Description, outlining the position I was looking to fill. The task was too big for me alone but I was hoping that my global network of friends would help. If I emailed them the Soul Mate Job Description, they could act as Date Wranglers, sending it out to *their* global network of friends and corralling suitable dates for me around the world.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered why I hadn't done this sooner?

Okay, the Relationship Résumé:

DATE: 1984–5

TITLE: First Love

COMPANY: William

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Going to festivals; riding around on the back of a motorbike; protesting at Greenham Common; finding politics; losing virginity.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: Made redundant; replaced by someone who drank Bacardi Breezers.

DATE: 1985–9

TITLE: First Live-in Relationship

COMPANY: Peter

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Learning to cook; having lots of dinner parties; buying things for the flat; having Sunday lunch with his family; getting engaged.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: Applied for a position overseas.

DATE: 1989–95

TITLE: Wife

COMPANY: Philip

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Being spontaneous and not worrying too much about tomorrow; sharing adventures; being supportive of each other's dreams; saying 'No, Philip, that's too crazy'.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: Was relocated back to the UK.

DATE: January 1996

TITLE: Transition Relationship

COMPANY: Dan

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Drinking Jack Daniels and staying up very late; watching a lot of Tarantino films; listening to heavy-metal music; bursting into tears.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: Short-term contract.

DATE: February – June 1996

TITLE: Career Advisor

COMPANY: Edmund

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Edmund was writing a book. My role was to go over to his house or sit on the phone every night and listen to what he had written that day. Criticism was not welcome: only attention and praise.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: Communication breakdown.

DATE: August 1996

TITLE: Fellow Adventurer

COMPANY: Jason

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: To swap travel stories and talk about all the crazy places we had been/both wanted to go to.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: I met Jason a week before he was due to set off to *Pedal the Planet* for four years. NB: Carried out some freelance work for this company over Xmas.

DATE: 1997–8

TITLE: Company Trustee

COMPANY: Grant

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: To listen to Grant complain about his ex-wife and how glad he was they had split up.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: They hadn't split up.

DATE: 1999–2004

TITLE: Coco the Clown

COMPANY: Kelly

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES: Feeling everything was my fault and that I was too

demanding/needy/neurotic/ successful. Believing things would get better if I could only understand what the problem was.

REASONS FOR LEAVING: I was unwilling to job-share.

Hmmm. Writing the Relationship Résumé had been an illuminating but not terribly uplifting experience: it looked like I hadn't been in a good relationship for ages. For a moment I wondered if I was better off forgetting about romantic relationships and sticking to having fun with my millions of other single female friends.

But that was silly. My single friends wanted to be in a relationship as much as I did: even if *I* bottled out and stayed single there was no guarantee *they'd* stay that way (and I hoped for all their sakes they wouldn't – I wanted them to meet their Mr Rights too).

No, I wanted to be in a good relationship. I missed having that close connection with one person, feeling that I was at the centre of something rather than bobbing around the edges. But I wanted one of the early happy-style relationships, not one of the hard, rubbish ones I seemed to have specialised in in recent years. Clearly the Soul Mate Job Description needed serious consideration if I was to avoid disappointment and disaster.

First I needed to decide on the kind of person I wanted to meet. Well, since I was 5 ft 11, height was very important: I need the chemistry when someone's tall enough to put their arm around my shoulders – I absolutely could not date someone shorter than me. I'd like someone who was affectionate without being overbearing – such a hard one to get right. Someone who was smart, funny, adventurous and had his own friends. Since divorced men have a 'marriage-shaped' hole in their lives that they are looking to quickly fill, and single women have a 'disaster-shaped' hole in their lives they want to keep empty for as long as possible, I didn't want someone who was going to take me over completely.

What else? An interest in music was good, too much interest in TV was bad. I am a vegetarian and although I don't mind meat-eaters, anyone with a love of offal should probably not apply. I don't like smokers (goodbye, Jean Pierre) but distrust anyone who doesn't drink. They don't have to have their own library card but a few books on the shelf would be good (Science Fiction and Self Help don't count). I don't mind guys who are slightly overweight but 'man breasts' are a complete no-no. Skinny guys are out: if their waists are smaller than my thighs, it's not going to work. I quite like laid-back guys but absolutely no slackers, potheads or wannabe poets (if I want to see the 'beauty' in anything, I'll go to the Mac counter, thank you very much). Sporty is good, but don't expect me to come watch if it's raining.

Having said all of that, I *was* open-minded and probably needed to challenge what I thought my type of man really was – with the exception of man breasts and offal: they were non-negotiable.

The next step was to assemble my network of Date Wranglers (DWs), including: Belinda, Charlotte, Simon, Cath, Ian, Eleanor, Sara-Jane, Hector, Jeannette, Jo, Posh PR Emma, Paula, Sophie, Madhav, Jill, Matt, Lizzy, Grainne . . . All old friends, either in the travel industry or journalists who have worked overseas for years. These First Generation Date Wranglers all had an extensive network of contacts and friends around the world, who would either be Dates or Second or Third Generation Date Wranglers in their own right. I'd already talked to everyone about my plans, but it was now time to send out a briefing email and get the team to work.

Dear Date Wranglers

A few of you have asked what kind of person I'm looking to meet and what I want to do on the date (thank you, Sophie – Jose the Chilean sheep farmer sounds lovely. And Jo, yes Jason the Buddhist lawyer in Nova Scotia might be perfect). I've pasted a Soul Mate Job Description below. Please read it carefully. If it sounds

like a single someone you know anywhere in the world, and they'd be willing to date me, please let me know. I'll then sit down with a list of potential dates and pick the ones that look most promising and fall relatively easily into a route around the world. Dinner at my house on the 12th for questions/brainstorming/reality check.

Lots of love, Jxx

Soul Mate Job Description

I am a 38-year-old writer living in London. I've done a bit of travelling over the years and am planning another big trip soon. When not schlepping my backpack on and off Indian trains, maxing my card at Macy's or eating gelati in Italy, I love London Life. Sunday papers and coffee with my friends, plus shows, gigs and movies. I'm a bit sporty, especially running (though not very far or fast) and cycling (see 'running'). I'm bad at spelling but good at cooking. I sing along to music and always seem to forget Xmas cards till the last minute. I'm fairly laid-back about most things, though get pathetically competitive playing poker.

And what am I looking for in a man?

I'm pretty tall at 5 ft 11 but old-fashioned enough to want to feel 'ladylike', so looking for someone over 6 foot. What else? Well, I'd like to meet someone who makes me smile, lets me read them bits out the newspaper, has beliefs they're willing to arm wrestle for and tells me interesting things I didn't know. Like me, you'll believe that life is short and you should make the most of it; unlike me, you'll probably realise that TV isn't real and remain calm when Lassie doesn't come home. An interest in music and books is good, a sense of fun and adventure essential.

The response was instant, overwhelming and very reassuring: everyone was fired up with suggestions and ideas. Maybe all my competitive friends just wanted to prove they each had the best contacts, but I actually think everyone genuinely wanted to help and believed that they had just the person for me.

Queries started flooding in. Sophie bluntly asked:

Do you want to sleep with them all or just dinner/chat about life etc...? Lemme know, it'll influence who I put you onto. Love S

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I have to be honest, this panicked me a bit. My journey had already been dubbed 'Around the World in 80 Lays' by most of my friends. I automatically replied with a '*It's not about sex, it's about romance*' mantra but was secretly worrying whether every date was going to end in a wrestling match.

Posh PR Emma rang and asked in cut-glass tones if I wanted to date a Count? Her impeccable accent made the 'o' completely silent. Realising how it sounded, she kept repeating the question, which drew attention to the mispronunciation, making it worse. I felt like replying: 'Ems, I've already dated so many.'

As my DWs went to work and word of what I was doing began buzzing around, potential dates started pouring in. Every morning I would log on to find up to a hundred emails from people looking to get involved.

First-generation DWs introducing me to second-generation DWs:

Jennifer, meet Abigail, she is the most high-flying woman in New York – head honcho, inspired party gal, groovy travelling companion of many years and dear, dear friend...AND I think she has the perfect date for

you...she will tell you more...I can't wait to hear the outcome
...SJ xxxxx

Third-generation DWs signing up and asking for basic clarification:

Does he need to speak English? Would you be willing to go on a *ménage a trois* with a translator? Hannah, emailing from Budapest

Giving me a 'wake up and smell the fertility' reality check:

PS. You say you don't want to date men younger than 30. I have two words for you: sperm motility. If you're still in the race to have a child before, say, 45, you'll need energetic critters rather than those about to retire. Leslie, emailing from Moscow

And forcing me to face the facts:

These are the details of the English lady I was telling you about: I hope she sounds interesting to you. She's a very nice lady, aged 38 (but this is quite normal in the UK, to be old and still single) . . . read the email trail between Alex and his friend Beaver in Lithuania.

At the same time that I was being contacted by DWs and their Dates, I was also out looking for myself, spending hours on the Internet researching places or events that might yield my Soul Mate. Anything to do with Love or a love of mine should have potential, I reasoned. I scoured the search engines like an intrepid love detective sleuthing for clues that would help me identify and locate my missing man. In some instances this threw up dreadful red herrings. I am a huge devotee of Marmite, for example, and thought this might make me compatible with the man who ran a Marmite appreciation website in America:

I started the Marmite site because I take Marmite into work with me on a Friday (the company I work for supplies breakfast, mainly bagels though we do have toast as well and sometimes yogurt, though I don't have Marmite with the yogurt. Just the bagels. And the toast, if they've run out of bagels). Other than eating Marmite, I write information management and delivery software for the Internet...

Thankfully, other leads proved to be more fruitful, such as The Costco Soul Mate Trading Outlet, one of the theme camps at the annual Burning Man Festival, held in the Nevada desert. I didn't totally understand what they were about, but I did manage to establish that Costco was a kind of anarchic dating agency at the festival. The CEO, Rico Thunder, agreed that I could be part of their camp and work on their 'front desk' in exchange for some light flirting duties. I felt I'd have some useful expertise to contribute by the time I'd made it through Europe and the West Coast of America on to Nevada, plus I fully intended to skim off any suitable Soul Mates for myself. Rico also put me in touch with a Seattle-based audio engineer in TV sports who was one of the Costco crew. He matched my Soul Mate Job Description perfectly and emailed:

The things you write in your description could have been written by me! What is up with that?

Love: Cooking, building/restoring cars (just finished an Alfa), music, road trips

Hate: Working out (still do it), rigid people, being cold for long periods of time, speed bumps

Finally, the tsunami that was my Date Cultivate Timetable swept over me. The only way I could cope with the huge volume of correspondence was to ruthlessly compartmentalise. In the process of establishing a tentative rapport with the desirables and gently filtering out the inadvisables, Europe was given priority over America, which in turn took precedence over Australasia.

Big picture, that was how I saw my route working: Europe, US, Australasia. It wasn't logical from a geographical point of view, but it made it possible to attend specific events at certain times, plus – as importantly – ensured that I'd always be travelling with the sun. This meant I could stay warm, pack light and see people at their/my most foxy. There are valid reasons that all the feel-good songs – 'Summer Breeze', 'Summer Lovin'', 'Summer of '69' – are written about the summer rather than the miserable winter months. Who looks good with chapped lips and a scarf?

Communication all had to be via email: it was the only way I could keep track of what I'd said to whom, and reply to people in my own time rather than real time. Most people were fine with this but occasionally someone insisted that we had to speak on the phone:

I don't want to rush you but I much prefer speaking as opposed to typing. Feel free to call me on 877-722-****. Toll-free USA. In Canada or elsewhere 561-178-****. Christopher, Florida

This always put me in a spin. I didn't really have the time for more than a single conversation with any one person and there was no way they'd just want to talk once: inevitably they'd want to know all about me as well as when I was coming over, how long I was staying for and all the other details of my trip. But I didn't have answers to these questions yet and the stress of organising this mammoth undertaking was taking its toll as I comfort-ate, putting the 'ate' in 'date' just at the time I really needed to look my best.

I was tentatively working towards a route that would start in the Netherlands, head up through Scandinavia, then down through Mediterranean Europe, central Europe and on to the States. This was just guesswork, though, because – for example – until Henk in Amsterdam got back from his skiing trip, I had no way of knowing if he was free on the 27th? If he was, that would mean I'd be able to make it down to see Frank on the Belgian border, thereby arriving in Barcelona in time to meet Carlos before he set off for his conference in Russia:

...though I am in with my good friends in St Petersburg and maybe it would be that you like to join us there if you are in a visit to this place?

I just needed everyone to stay still long enough to give me an answer that would allow me to include or eliminate them from my itinerary. Then – knowing they were locked in – I could work out who, logically, I should see next. And that was just the dating side of it. My friend Karin, who worked at the Netherlands tourist board, was hugely helpful in trying to work out how I would get between three dates spread over 250 miles:

I've been looking for public transport facilities from Schiphol to the Efteling and from the Efteling to the Keukenhof and I must say it's not good news...It will take you 2.5 hours to get from Schiphol to the Efteling and 3 hours to get from the Efteling to the Keukenhof. I knew it would be bad as you have to use both trains and buses, but I didn't know it would be this lousy. A taxi is not really an alternative, that will be really expensive, but I was thinking you could maybe rent a car for two or three days? Do you have your driver's licence and would it be a good idea? I've attached an information sheet with car rental companies at Schiphol and in Amsterdam. If you like the idea, you could phone them and ask for prices. If you do prefer to use public transport I can tell you exactly which trains and buses you have to take, so just let me know.

I felt guilty as she clearly wanted me to make a decision and all I could do was be vague and noncommittal. The problem was that she was asking about the minutiae of one aspect of three dates while I was in a totally different place, struggling to get the big picture straight on *all* aspects of *all* 80 dates. It felt akin to being dragged from a burning building by the emergency services, only to have them demand back an overdue library book.

With so many options and nothing actually nailed down, I started feeling the enormity of what I was attempting. I was getting a tad tense trying to stay focused whilst having to remain upbeat and chatty corresponding with the avalanche of potential dates. I knew I wouldn't get much in the way of sympathy ('*Help, I am being hounded by an endless supply of eligible, international bachelors, all wanting to date me...*') but even if I'd been foolish enough to ask, I wouldn't have got anyone's attention at this point. Brimming with enthusiasm and support, the DWs had gone off on a mission of their own.

I had clearly said I wanted to date my Soul Mate and explained in detail who that person was. But suddenly, girlfriends were less interested in helping me find *my* ideal man and more interested in helping themselves live out a cherished fantasy. They had found a way to date The One Who Could Have Been.

Could Haves are those intense, poignant relationships that, for some reason, never get actioned. But despite this, or maybe because of it, these people become imbued with an aura of exquisite perfection that only increases as the years go by. A pocket of my (mostly married) DWs had just realised that I could go on the date they had always longed for. No guilt on their part, plus I would be able to tell them afterwards if the date was as blissful as they had always imagined.

Jen, I have always, always had a huge crush on Paul but we were never single at the same time. You lucky girl, he's free now – I want to know EVERYTHING. Lucinda xxx

PS. Get him to take you to The Dove – we always used to go there together for drinks after work: it's really romantic. Sit at the table by the window. The Chardonnay's great. Order the fish.

Or they'd become distracted by their own idea of what the optimum Soul Mate was like, rather than working to mine: 'Oh, you should date a circus performer,' Dea said with great conviction, no explanation and a faraway look in her eye. 'Ohmigod, you could date a tramp,' Jo exploded, then gazed off in a similarly mute manner, lost in her own thoughts.

Clearly, I needed to get them to refocus and I knew the only way this would happen would be if I made them competitive about coming up with the best dates. I sent another email to the group:

I am so grateful to you all for coming up with such great contacts and the current joint favourites for the (Little Black) Booker Prize are Paul Mansfield and Belinda Rhodes. Eleanor Garland pulled away from the pack towards the end of last week, though, and is now gaining fast.

I am now fully dated up for N. America and Australia. Holland is looking good too. Can anyone help with France, Germany, Spain and Italy? How about Asia – HK, Thailand and Singapore?

Thankfully, this led to a fresh deluge of dates but also to a new phenomenon: Date Wrangler Anxiety. Hector, a journalist friend at *China Daily*, emailed from Beijing, frustrated that he didn't seem to be able to come up with any good dates. He felt he was letting me down and not being a good friend. 'Write an article about it,' I suggested. 'Interview me about why I'm doing it, include my Soul Mate Job Description and then anyone who thinks they're "it" can email me at a special email address I'll create.' Overwhelmed by the greater task in hand and consigning it to the *I'll worry about it when I'm on to Australasia* pile, I promptly forgot all about the conversation. Until two weeks later, when Hector sheepishly sent me a link for that day's paper. On the cover was a huge picture of me, smiling vacantly. Underneath, the caption read: 'is there a man in china to satisfy this woman?'

Most of the time that I was working on setting up this International Tour of Shame, as I'd affectionately come to think of it, I was too engrossed and in the zone to think about anything else. But occasionally there were stone-cold moments of sober clarity, when it really hit me how it must have looked to other people.

The *China Daily* cover was one of them. I sat in front of my computer, shocked and rather ashamed, wondering why I had started this crazy adventure in the first place. But then, as the responses to the article started pouring in, I was once again too frantic keeping up with the task at hand to have any more perspective or qualms.

Replies ranged from Tom in HK:

I am currently seeing someone but we don't really get on that well and on the off-chance I've split up with her by the time you get here, can we please stay in touch?

And Larry, the pilot:

I've seen your picture. You're not that good-looking and you make no effort with your hair: I like that kind of confidence in a woman and I'll definitely date you. But don't expect to go to expensive restaurants or be a nosy parker and talk about me to my friends.

To Tan the businessman:

I look forward to meeting a western woman, so different from Asian women: you with your 'fuller' body and more voluptuous breasts. In a country of billions, you will certainly stand out.

Well, my comfort eating *was* getting out of hand now, and I was putting on so much weight I'd started wondering if I should just cut out the middleman and staple the biscuits directly onto my thighs. Despite the weight gain, however, I felt sure I lacked the prized voluptuousness that would make me a worthy ambassador for Breast Western. And the idea that a billion people were going to be disappointed with my cleavage was frankly too much pressure to be dealing with right now.

Fortunately I was saved from dwelling on this thought because a combination of brute force and plaintive begging had finally pulled my European schedule loosely together. There was still a huge amount to be done: I knew who I was meeting and where, but still had no idea where I was staying when I arrived, or, indeed, in most cases how I would arrive at all? I accepted I would have to work this out along the way.

It was time to start dating.

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