

Clicking for Love

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The Curious, Odious, Hilarious World of Online Dating

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[NOTE: This is the complete version of an essay that was greatly abridged for publication in the Boston Globe's Sunday Magazine.]

It was when the first woman I'd exchanged messages with invited me to give her a call that I suddenly realized just how screwy and contrived on-line dating really is. She and I had "met," I should explain, on a dating site whose name rhymes with "No way, stupid!" Participants are invited to answer a seemingly endless list of questions, many of them deeply personal, from which an algorithm derives your compatibility scores with everyone else on the site. These percentages can reach into the high 90s, signaling just how much you have in common with each individual – including individuals from whom, had you met at a party, you would be excusing yourself after 45 seconds to freshen your drink.¹

Anyway, as I was dialing this particular woman, I suddenly realized two things. A: I didn't know her name. B: I knew a great deal about her preferences regarding oral sex.

I knew many dozens of details, as a matter of fact, not only about her

sexual predilections but about her romantic history, personal hygiene practices, ethical standards, religious convictions, and political beliefs. She was a complete stranger to me, and yet I had a whopping pile of information about her (as well as a writing sample and a photo of uncertain vintage). I knew the sorts of things that in a previous century – say, the twentieth – would be revealed gradually, naturally, in the context of conversations that took place as the two of you spent time together and a relationship took hold and deepened.

Maybe it's just one more example of faux intimacy in the modern world, like the habit of addressing complete strangers by their first names. But no sooner do I tsk my tongue about how the cart (full of dater data) has been put before the horse than I come across the profile of someone who has chosen to answer very few of the questions – or even none at all. Good for her! I want to think. But what I actually think is: Hey! Is she so lazy or busy or secretive that she couldn't take a few minutes? How the hell am I supposed to know her policy about the number of dates she needs before she'll sleep with me? Or how she feels about flag-burning and gun control?

Not only do you quickly develop a feeling of entitlement about the availability of these answers, but there's some pleasure to be derived from the way the questions are constructed, including the multiple-choice responses from which we're supposed to choose. One question asks how we'd feel about being slapped hard in the face during sex – and the possible answers include “horrorified,” “aroused,” and “nostalgic.” More than I want to meet the woman of my dreams, I want to meet the employee who came up with that last option.

What triggers a flash of actual nostalgia is a memory of the days when you met someone in the real world, perhaps at an activity that both of you enjoy, perhaps someone who wasn't even supposed to be your type. That person might have caught your fancy, and the first order of business was to figure out whether he or she was, like you, unattached. Today, by contrast, you encounter scads of folks on a website where the *only* thing you know about them is that they're unattached.² Which means you sit alone in your house sifting clues to

calculate the odds that you and one of these people would get along if you met in person. You use a variety of filters to exclude people you assume wouldn't be suitable – with no opportunity for one of them to prove you wrong.

There's something unnatural and unseemly about trawling for kindred spirits in a virtual sea of single people, playing Click for Love. But even as I say that, I want to be careful not to romanticize romance in the days before we did this. The last time I was looking for women it was technically possible to get online, but this involved placing a phone receiver on an oddly shaped device and waiting while it emitted a series of high-pitched whistles and staticky sounds. Instead, I went on plenty of blind (or at least seriously myopic) dates during which we gamely made conversation while wishing it was possible to signal for the check even before the menus had arrived. These were dinners during which my thoughts kept turning to the well-meaning mutual friend who had set us up: "What could she have been *thinking*? The only thing this woman and I have in common is that we're both vertebrates."

So, no – things weren't perfect for single people during the analog era. What's more, some of the bitterness with which folks describe their on-line dating experiences is, well, misplaced. The process of looking for romance consists of casting a net and pulling it in, casting and pulling. When you use a website, you're just able to do that a lot more efficiently or at least cover more of the ocean so you pull in that many more tuna and catfish and grouper and sharks. And seaweed and sandals and beer cans. In other words, a lot of complaints about online dating aren't really the fault of dating's being on-line.

Part of the problem, in fact, is that we have higher expectations for this medium. If you go to a party, you're not surprised when the only smart, attractive people are already taken. But when you register (and perhaps pay) for a dating service specifically so you can be surrounded by individuals who aren't already taken, well, goddammit, you expect to be matched. *So where are all the smart, attractive people?* The proper point of comparison, we tend to forget, isn't an imaginary ideal – a scenario where you sign up and promptly find everlasting love – but real life, where, as some of us recall, it's

possible to be on the lookout for years and still not find anyone about whom you exclaim, "This is the one." (Let alone someone who simultaneously says the same thing about you).

Let's be clear, then: Not everything unsatisfactory or bizarre about this process is specific to on-line dating.

But some things are.

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Even the excuse of writing an essay about the subject hasn't been enough to induce me to read men's profiles. Fortunately, I've been spared the trouble thanks to the grumbling summaries of them offered by women. Apparently a disproportionate number of men's photos are selfies taken in their bathrooms, sometimes shirtless. Or wearing sunglasses. Or posed next to their cars. Or water-skiing. Or brandishing large dead fish. Women over forty report being pursued on a regular basis by 20-something men looking only for sex. And males of various ages, I'm led to understand, often seem to lack the gift of gab when they send a message to someone who has caught their eye. One woman comments dryly that a typical message consists, in its entirety, of "Hi, their!" Another says she keeps finding men who "believe if they earn a buck and a half they deserve Scarlett Johansson." Their top priority, presumably because of their appreciation for comedy, is finding a woman with whom there will be "no drama."

I guess what I'm saying here is that one of the rewards of connecting with women online is hearing them complain about men who are not me. I can't pass judgment about the accuracy of their impressions. But I would be pleased to say something about the on-line self-presentation of women, a topic about which I have considerably more information.

First, it appears that, upon reaching a certain age, women are required to sign up for yoga. They may not want to, but it's the law. Second, many grown women for some reason make a point of referring to themselves as "girls," sometimes even working this word into their user names.

None of them can survive without coffee. More than a few post their Myers-Briggs initials. By a remarkable coincidence, what people notice first about each and every one of them is her distinctive smile and eyes. But in order to avoid seeming immodest, many praise themselves by attributing the compliments to others – as in “My friends say that I’m gorgeous, witty, brilliant, irresistible...”

Many, many women are looking for a “partner in crime.” Virtually all find joy in the simple things, value friends and family, are down to earth, yet dare to describe themselves as having a sarcastic sense of humor. Some paint a remarkably detailed and thus unintentionally poignant picture of their romantic yearnings, conjuring a perfect partner who is loyal and kind, honest, athletic, and a terrific kisser, someone who is eager to take her on thrilling adventures, who shares her interests, loves to cuddle, gives her butterflies in the stomach and makes her laugh until it hurts.

Photos occasionally include kids and pets and sometimes are taken in (and of) exotic lands, the point apparently being to make the rest of us depressed about the repetitive, prosaic, embarrassingly local lives we – and apparently *only* we – are leading.

Most of all, it seems that every woman, regardless of age, despises the indoors. I say this because, according to their profiles, every spare moment is devoted to skiing, hiking, climbing, running, diving, rafting, unicycling, spelunking, parachuting into triathlons, and engaging in a variety of other calorie-burning gerunds. How they simultaneously manage to keep up with all those Netflix shows they admit to loving presents a real puzzle. Perhaps they watch on their phones while they’re skiing, hiking, climbing, running, diving, etc.

Or maybe – and this is a farfetched idea, I realize, but indulge me for a moment just as a thought experiment – maybe not *every* claim that appears in these profiles is absolutely true. I tend to take people at their word, so it took me a while to notice that every single woman claimed to be leading an active, fulfilled, deeply gratifying life, drawing from an inexhaustible reservoir of optimism and energy, enjoying children who are a nonstop delight and friends who provide

continuous support and sparkling companionship.

In fact, I gradually came to suspect that even certain specific factual representations made on these profiles may be less than accurate. Women whom I met off-line informed me that some men's reports of their height tends to be, shall we say, aspirational. And as a reasonably skilled Googler, I found that a number of people managed to rationalize blatant dishonesty about their age. The first time I discovered this, I was reluctant to believe someone would just lie. Moral issues aside, wouldn't the misrepresentation be discovered soon enough and come back to bite them? Yet there I was, comparing a profile with details about her that I'd found on LinkedIn, and my first thought was, "Wait. How did this woman manage to graduate from college at the age of 15?"

Even when there's no reason to suspect dishonesty, the nearly interchangeable nature of most profiles means that if you're the sort who doesn't want to select solely on the basis of photos, you will have to perform a close textual analysis in order to locate a unique detail to ask about in an introductory message. Sure, I know it's daunting to write about yourself, and even more challenging to come up with a fresh angle – to be honest but not overshare, to seem appealing without sounding as if you're trying too hard. Yet it's remarkable how perfunctory these statements often are.

Rarely, for example, do people bother to describe what they do for a living, let alone how they feel about their work. This reticence may be partly due to the structure of the sites. On some of them, the length of personal statements is limited and the multiple-choice items for indicating how you make a living are structured in rather broad categories. (To wit: "Medical/Dental/Veterinary/Fitness." You don't know if this person cleans teeth, performs neurosurgery, or teaches Pilates.) Still, most people don't come close to filling even the space they're given, nor do they take advantage of the opportunity to annotate the occupational classification they've selected.

It's an odd paradox, isn't it? In some cases you get too much information too soon; in other cases, not nearly enough. Either way,

the process seems frustrating and unnatural. And the problem isn't primarily due to the small-bore deficiencies of the sites or the people who use them. It's that you're participating in a depressing hierarchy of desirability – a daisy chain of quiet rejection. You spend part of your time trying to recover from, and make sense of, all these potentially lovely people who won't give you the time of day. You spend the rest of your time flicking off people in whom *you* have no interest. You're bemused, indignant, stung by the superficial jerks out there who dismiss you for being a little too short or fat or old, too passive or insistent or off-kilter – and then you turn around and do something similar to those who express an interest in you. It's a distasteful process to watch, let alone to take part in.

Hope lives in the temporal gap between when you reach out to someone with your can't-miss message of witty warm greeting – and when the recipient is recorded as having read what you wrote but has evidently decided not to write back. You think: Not interested? How is that possible? I can type 80 words a minute, pick out commercial jingles on the piano (including chords!), and afford a seven-day subscription to the *New York Times*. I have several relatives who still speak to me, am firmly committed to stopping global climate change – and this bozo won't even say hi?!

Could it be age? Well, maybe for you it could, but in my case I frankly don't see how. I am, after all, still in my prime as a "40-something" – a label I'd argue is perfectly valid, in much the same way that 3:35 could be described as "a little after two o'clock." In any case, I was interested to discover that it's not only men who prefer younger partners. I'd estimate that as many as 40 percent of women offer a range of desired ages that stretches asymmetrically downward, so that, for example, a 46 year old might say she'd like to hear from men who are between 34 and 48. This is a little less surprising after the umpteenth profile (including my own) in which the writer insists that he or she feels and looks younger than his or her chronological age. We're all unusually youthful, every last one of us, male and female, and thus we *belong* with people younger than we are.

I can't see a practical problem here. Can you?³

But perhaps I'm investing my profile – its content and the way it's written – with unreasonable hope. The number-crunching co-founder of a popular dating site reports that “what you write about yourself hardly makes a difference in the number of messages you get.” In fact, “your words have about one-twelfth the impact of your picture.” What I keep telling myself is that this is just a summary statistic and doesn't apply to the kind of women I'm interested in.

Poor response rates are par for the course, in any case – and that's partly due to the fact that a significant number of profiles, at least on some sites, are shells. Their creators are no longer active and the sites have no incentive to take them down. And let's be frank: the odds are particularly stacked against men. A recent article about online dating in *Time* magazine mentioned the “consistent finding” that “women get a ton more attention than men. Even a guy at the highest end of attractiveness barely receives the number of messages almost all women get.” A 2013 survey on a dating website yielded the staggering finding that only 4 percent of men's messages to women were answered. One writer sees this as empowering for women, crowing that, online, “every day [is] Sadie Hawkins Day.”

But the reason women have a much larger pool from which to choose is that, with the exception of transparently fishy come-ons,⁴ men remain more likely than women to take the initiative and send a note of greeting to those who interest them – a continuation of traditional gender roles. (In my experience, many women – though, happily, not all – signal their interest by clicking on “like” or “wink” or “favorite” and then expect the man to get in touch with them. Some don't even do that; they just wait for the offers to roll in.)

The result is that reasonably attractive women in early-to-mid middle age are in high demand. Their message boxes are full – even if, by their testimony, many of those notes are terse, ungrammatical, or sent out in search of hook-ups rather than romance. This means each man is just one in a long queue of suitors outside the castle waiting for a

chance to impress the princess, just another vendor hoping for an appointment with a prized customer, just another ambitious teen plotting to catch the eye of an Ivy League admissions officer. Women aren't weighing each message for possible promise; they're looking for any reason to hit delete because they need to winnow a list that's long and constantly being replenished with more hopefuls.

Even if you do score a response – even if their profile meets your criteria, and your message meets theirs – this may not count for much. Not long ago I received a reassuringly lengthy and animated reply to my message, a descriptive set of answers to the questions I'd asked about her. I responded appreciatively and expressed interest in what she had said. Again she replied promptly, offering even more details. I was delighted until I suddenly realized that in neither message had she asked me anything about myself, so I told her I was intrigued by what she had written and curious to hear more but wondered if there was anything she might want to know about me. I never heard from her again.

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As you may have noticed, the danger in writing about online dating is the temptation to lapse into complaint. This isn't particularly appealing to those around us and it doesn't make for restful nights. One resolves not to take rejection personally, particularly since just about everyone on these sites tends to sound similar plaintive notes. (All dating sites get poor user reviews, with consumers sounding off about the sleazy or simply inadequate people they encountered there.) After all, someone who was completely satisfied wouldn't still be using the service.

There's no end to the reasons why each prospective mate, even those who seem extremely promising, might take a pass on you – and in most cases you're never told what those reasons are. If someone does take the time to explain (“I'm sorry, but I could never date someone who...”), you think, “Really? You believe that's a good enough reason not to pursue this? Why would you ignore all the other ways in which we might turn out to be an ideal match?” And then you remember that

you have your own list of criteria and red flags and turnoffs, many of which might seem pretty silly to someone else. We may be placing the blame on the process – or on the available single people – for a result that’s partly due to our own finickiness. It’s worth keeping in mind that the *cri de coeur* “There are no good (men)(women) out there!” is not only overstated but predates dot-com dating by a good many years.

So why do we persist if we’re all bellyaching about it? Most men and women I’ve met who frequent these sites throw up their hands periodically – not just from the battering their egos take but because it can seem so bloody pointless. And then loneliness or lack of any alternative drives them back for another round. It reminds me of a toy I once saw in a store window: a pecking wooden bird on a pivot that swings back and forth in slow arcs, getting progressively closer to a container of water until its beak finally gets wet, which immediately causes it to jerk back as far away as possible. And then it begins the journey again.

As Woody Allen reminded us in *Annie Hall* after telling the old joke about the guy who refuses to consult a psychiatrist about his brother who thinks he’s a chicken: We need the eggs. Furthermore, the current shortage of egg suppliers explains why we stick with online dating in particular despite everything about it that’s dehumanizing, backwards, and ego-deflating (with its capacity to deliver more rejections more quickly). No one likes air travel these days, but what are you going to do? Take a bus to the other coast?

Maybe the better analogy, at least for those of us well beyond the Millennial demographic, is to airplane *food*: We used to complain about it and now they don’t feed us at all so there’s nothing to complain about. Relying on friends to set you up simply isn’t a practical alternative at my age. In your twenties, there were single people everywhere you looked. Now, if you ask a pal to find someone for you, you’re lucky if she knows one or two people who are unattached. Which means the basis for any given recommendation amounts to “Oh, you should call _____. *She’s single!*”

Here's Lorrie Moore's description – as cheerful as it is charitable – of middle-aged people who date: “graying human flotsam with scorched internal landscapes, mimicking the young, picking up where they had left off decades ago, if only they could recall where the hell that was.” In theory, the process should be easier, or at least less uncomfortably urgent, for those of us in the middle. We're in between the first biological clock (Gotta reproduce!) and the second (Don't wanna die alone!) – and therefore have the luxury of being less goal oriented, the same way we've learned to be about sex. We can treat the process itself – the search, the exchange of messages, the one-off dinners – as intellectually intriguing, diverting, amusing, and perhaps even valuable for fulfilling the Delphic oracle. It's not a waste of time even when it doesn't lead anywhere.

Or so we keep telling ourselves.

NOTES

1. You want another impressive number? Ninety-nine percent of our DNA is identical to that of chimpanzees.
2. Actually, you can't be sure even of that, but never mind.
3. “I'm sorry, but you're just too old for me.” “What a coincidence. You're too old for me, too.”
4. I refer here to women whose photos suggest they are employed as professional models but who harbor an improbable weakness for older men. The profile of one woman, half my age and dying to meet me, began as follows: “I have quiet individuality and the big sense of humour.”

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