

Blind alley's

'You know, I want a man, now!' Pinky threw her arms theatrically into the air. She sat opposite me in the restaurant where we'd arranged to meet. It was a week after her sailing holiday round the Greek Islands. She had just finished telling me how bored she'd been, stuck with six dull men on a small boat. She was frustrated, because she had thought she would meet a nice guy on this exclusive sailing trip. 'They were either drunk or talking bullshit, you should have seen me pacing over the deck. God, my life is so empty, I'm sick of it,' she ended her story.

'But Pinky, you don't have an empty life, you've heaps of friends, successful career, nice flat, enough money, you travel a lot and still think a man beats all that?' I said.

'Absolutely, my life is so superficial. All these brief liaisons during business trips in hotels from Moscow to Tokyo, Madrid and Paris; I'm fed up with it. I just want a nice man'.

'He'll turn up, just you see.'

'But where? Where do I find the perfect guy? Devoted to me, waiting for me on the sofa with his slippers on.'

'Poor you, I bet you'll be bored stiff after a week.'

'No, I want kids and a family like you, Liz. And I'd better get a move on if I want them before my 40th.'

'Well, that's still six years from now, you can still do it in one, like I did.'

'Huh, you were 22, very fertile and met the most virile man.' There she was right. I met Tim, while I was hitchhiking and it was love at first sight. I went from virginity to pregnancy overnight. I never finished my studies, got four kids in five years and have had no job to date. I'm not pretty like Pinky, never have enough money, but I'm happy with Tim and my kids.

'Last week at my brother's birthday party I spoke to this nice guy Matt and he complained to me like you have about the drawback of living alone,' I said.

'What about it.'

'Well stupid, he may be the perfect match for you. Intelligent, handsome, well bred, polite, what else could you possibly want?'

'You haven't forgotten my Alphabet, have you? My man has to be ABC: Artistic, Balanced and Committed. KLM: Kind, Loving and Magical, completed with PQR for Passionate, Quick and Relaxed and finally Z for Zealous. If you think he possesses enough of these qualities, you're welcome to set up a blind date.'

'Pinky, you wouldn't find all of these qualities in any man, just be glad if he has two or three. This Matt comes close, I think. I will arrange a date for you. What about a picnic next Sunday.'

'Okay, if you think I have to meet this guy, go ahead.'

Dear old Pinky, she is my best friend and has always come across so independent, but it seems she has her weak moments too - she's never shown such desperation to me before. I actually thought she was the perfect example of a woman who lives alone and likes it, strong and self-possessed. She must be fed up with having so many responsibilities, but she's so good at it. She plays tough businessmen to perfection and knows just how to wind them round her little finger. Her bright and sunny laugh makes them sign up for any ad. Because that is what she does, sells advertising space for newspapers and magazines to companies around the world. Of course travelling was a challenge for her at first and I can imagine that after four years of it she has grown weary. After school she started work straight away, as she was too restless to commit to years of study. Now she regrets her lack of education, but she is still practical and smart. I suggested that she find a creative job, like a graphic designer or costume designer. But of course she knows best, she finds her own way and always has, now that happens to be the search of a man.

The children delighted in helping to organise the picnic for their favourite aunt Pinky. I invited my brother Luke with his wife Tracy and asked casually. 'By the way, why don't you bring Matt, he seems such a nice guy to me. He might be able to make some friends, since he's a newcomer to town?'

Tim asked some of his football friends. Each child was allowed to ask one friend to lighten the atmosphere and I added our next-door neighbours and of course, Pinky to the group. That last Sunday in August was the perfect day for a picnic. The weather was lovely, sunny and warm. The riverbank, outside town, was luscious green, and food and wine were abundant as everyone had amply contributed. Pinky, still extremely sun-tanned from her boring holiday, looked pretty and vulnerable in her light summer dress. Matt, somewhat shy and stiff, helped Tim to light the barbecue. I saw Pinky studying him closely. When I finally found the right moment to introduce them to each other, her face was puckered into a frown as if I was given her a jail sentence. I kept an ear on their rather bloodless conversation.

'Pinky? Funny name, where does it come from?'

'What do you mean, funny name?'

'So childish,'

'Call me Rose if you want, but you'll be the odd one out, everybody calls me Pinky.'

'I like Rose.'

'Shall I call you Matthew then?'

No, no Mattheus is my actual name but Matt is fine.' Then there was a pause. I saw Pinky wobble from one leg to the other and just when the pause became awkward he continued.

'I'm a physicist and you?'

'I'm a bachelorette,' Pinky pronounced the word so fast that even I, used to her delivery, couldn't make much out of it.

'Bet you'll a rat? He repeated, 'Interesting, never heard of that profession.'

'Don't be silly, you've never heard of it?' He shook his head. Pinky went on, 'Well I earn a lot of money doing it.'

'How do you do that.'

'To begin with, I advise people on how to bet on rats, later on how to become one and lastly how to stay one.' Matt looked puzzled and I couldn't believe Pinky was so belligerent with him. Their conversation didn't last much longer. Later she came to me, complaining, 'Liz, he has nothing of my ABC, and is decidedly lacking H of Humour.'

A few weeks later she phoned me, 'Hi Liz, yesterday I got back from a trip to Australia, can I come over? I bought a newspaper and want to scan the dating ads with you.'

It was Saturday morning, Tim had gone out with all the children and I was just about to have a long soak in the bath. In stead of saying 'no', I said, 'Pinky, ads? even in your free time? Have you became a victim of your own work? I can't believe you'd sink so low.'

'It has nothing to do with work or sinking low, thousands of people are like me, on the lookout for a partner. We are all too busy and have no time for socialising. I think this is a perfect way of finding a husband'

'Husband? Good Lord, Pink, aren't you jumping ahead of yourself?'

'My future man is in there, I know it.'

'Okay, come on over but don't forget to go past the bakery.'

Of course we had a joyful morning. Sitting round my kitchen table, drinking coffee and munching on freshly baked goodies, as we giggled about the good-looking nature lovers, the sportsmen who loved Mozart by candlelight, the pyromaniac stargazers. One businessman said he was good at foot massage, another in reading Shakespeare out loud. A white-haired widower would love to travel with a sun-tanned brunette and a pensioner wanted to sail around the world with a soul mate. One advert stood out and Pinky wrote a letter to the writer. I was astonished to read how much she loved camping; hiking even when it rained, what a good cook she was and how she loved to have friends round for diner.

'So, I'm not your friend,' I said.

"What do you mean.'

'You've never invited me, or cooked for me, in all these years.'

'But we eat out and I always pay the bill.'

'Sure, but are you a good cook? Do you love having friends round? Hey Pink, you have to be honest, commit yourself.'

'I'm not going to be that open to a total stranger.'

'No? But then this man search of yours is not going to work.'

Pinky sent the same letter to several ads over the following weeks and she got out of it one invitation for a date and twenty rejections. She rang me the day after their first meeting. 'It was appalling!' she yelled in my ear, I had to hold the receiver at length. 'We met in a bar, he must have already had a few beers.'

'What were his first words.'

'Don't remember, he started talking about himself and never stopped. He didn't ask me one question. I simply had to listen to painstaking detail about the sudden death of his father; his ailing mother, his sister being a nun, his brother suffering from aids and how good he was at everything. God, such a bore.'

'And he had none of your alphabetical qualities?'

'Not one.'

'That's why he's probably still single?'

'Definitely, I left within an hour. I'm not going to waste my time on these silly sods, I tell you.'

'You'll have to change your attitude, dear. D'you still want a man?'

'Certainly.'

'What for, anyway?'

'To take over responsibility, to share, to be nice to, to be adored by,'

'Pff, that's already an awful lot.'

'You have that with Tim, haven't you?'

'Yeah, but I'm just lucky.'

'Don't you think that's normal then?'

'No.'

'Oh, you're such a cynic.'

Pinky became obsessed by her man search and put together her own ad. Rather unsure of herself she showed me the newspaper she'd placed it in.

"I, nice and bright business woman, don't want to meet you in the lobby of yet another hotel. Although you are a handsome, warm-hearted businessman I don't want to talk about making money. I want to visit a museum, a bookshop or a theatre. To listen to jazz or Bach, to dance

and make love. I would like to cook Spaghetti andante for you and book our hiking holiday to the Lakes; Let's meet in Venice, buddy."

I was impressed, though I had my doubts on the hiking trip to the Lakes. However, she got more than 50 replies on that ad. Some of them she read to me and I found them all rather boring, but she was enchanted and wanted to meet every one of them.

'I just can't choose. Suppose, I didn't recognise my future lover because he doesn't write very well.'

'So, W for Writer is not a letter in your alphabet?' I joked.

I didn't see or hear much of Pinky over the next months. Between her business trips she was dating her men. Then, one day out of the blue, she rang me to fill me in on what's she'd been up to. She sounded quite excited about her exploration into the male race.

'You know, Liz, I've learned so much about men, but I've also learned about myself. I'm under no illusion about finding the right guy. I love to listen to their stories but I'm astounded by how many of them have mental and emotional "baggage". Some of them are like dogs, waiting for a pat on the back from their master. One had extremely megalomaniac thoughts and regaled me with me his pathetic dreams. Many of them still have mother syndromes. A mother even sexually abused one guy. Several acted extremely childishly, and either lack any self-assurance or have too much of it. Self-knowledge or self-criticism is hardly present. Instead, practically all of them suffered from self-pity. I now know what I should have studied, psychology.' she finished.

I laughed and said, 'That's not a bad idea at all, but not really creative.'

'I'm not creative, you are creative.'

'And what about fun, was there any? It wasn't all that heavy, was it?'

'No not heavy, but not much fun either. Our so-called strong male race, is a farce. But I did laugh, sure. One time I wished you had been there, as I found myself in such a comical situation.'

'What happened.'

'Two letters arrived simultaneously and I, eager for some new admirers, tore open the envelopes and read the letters. One letter was really nice; the other one was crap, bad handwriting, loads of mistakes and so on. It's amazing how much you can deduce from their scribbles. Then I noticed two passport photos on the table. One was of a good-looking guy smiling back at me. The other photo was of a hairy obese staring into the lens, the type I don't fancy at all. Neither photo was signed. You should have seen the look on my face; I had no clue which photo belonged to which letter. I guessed the nice letter belonged to the looker. I rang that guy, Peter. He had a deep, sexy voice and we arranged to meet the following Saturday. I was ten minutes late and crossed the street in a hurry, whilst looking through the bar window. And guess what, I was expected on seeing the handsome guy, but instead the hairy obese was sitting behind the window, clutching his glass between his sausage-shaped fingers, waiting for the big moment to meet me. I saw my evening going down the drain with yet another poor soul, who didn't need my fake interest.'

'Pinky, hilarious, what did you do,'

'I just couldn't go into that bar. I turned on my heels, bought a bottle of 'Famous Grouse' and went home. I was so fed up, I swore I'd never date again, but at least I had a good laugh at myself.'

'How disappointing after all your effort, what happened to the looker?'

'Well, he wrote the crap letter, I had no intention of meeting up with him.'

'Maybe he is dyslexic, but does he has one of the other alphabetical qualities you so desperately want.'

' Probably, but I don't care anymore. Either way, I wouldn't have missed this whole ad thing. I've learned a lot - that I have motherly features, that I can be extremely female and soft, that I am also manipulative and though I'm not so well educated, I'm often much smarter than they are. I'm very pragmatic and a listener. I'm able to give advice and can actually help people just by listening.'

'Well dear, I could have told you that myself,' I said.

'One guy wrote a letter to thank me for my suggestions. He was still living with his parents, though he was 42. I simply told him that he had to liberate himself to make room for a love in his heart. Cut the parental ties and strings, I literally said.'

'You said that?'

'Yes, anyway, I've met 63 men in all, but only one guy got a second chance.'

'So now you're in love?' I joked.

'Mm, don't know.'

'What's he like.'

'He's called William, he's a jockey and runs a riding stable.'

'Ah, you've always been fond of horses.'

'Well, not exactly.'

'You can learn, well go on, age?'

'Thirty-eight, not handsome, even nearly bald, but he has sweet laughing eyes. What's more he's a brilliant cook. He came to cook at my place and brought all the ingredients.'

'Why not his place.'

'He has three children of three, five and seven, he didn't want to upset them.'

'Pardon me, so there's your family. What happened to his wife?'

'Ran off with one of the stable boys, he didn't say much about it, still seems rather blown away by it.'

'I can imagine.'

Some weeks later Pinky celebrated her 35th birthday. Tim and I and the children were invited. Amongst other friends there was William. He had offered to do the catering, so for once we were treated really well. He served tiger prawns, squid and oysters, quiches and the loveliest salads. He brought champagne and actually acted as the host. He looked so sweet in his apron, made jokes to everybody and behaved with confidence as if he had been part of the family for years. I liked him, I could see Pinky and he would easily match, but there was something elusive about him too. I had the feeling he was still in love with the mother of his children.

A month later Pinky invited me to catch up in our favourite restaurant. After I told her all about my children, Tim's promotion and my decorative sewing course, she launched into detail about William.

'He's a good guy and a fantastic father, he stimulates his children enormously, they draw and paint together and go camping, they make wooden hutches in the forest. One day when I went with them, I felt somehow outcast, although they did their best of course. But...'

'Ah, there is a but,' I interrupted. She went on, imperturbable, 'You know he has it all, we can talk about a lot of things, he is witty and wise, very practical and creative. He is emancipated, balanced, absolutely committed and so relaxed.'

'So he meets a lot of your alphabet.'

'Exactly, but I'm not in love. His lovemaking is kind of technical, perfect, but without any passion. I think he is still in love with his wife.'

'That's what I thought when I met him at your birthday party.'

'Really? You clever girl.'

'So, what's next'

'Oh, we stay friends, but for the rest? I know now, I'm perfectly happy without a man. I've learnt a lot and actually my freedom is so precious to me. Maybe I'm just too selfish.'

'Bullshit, you're not selfish.'

'Well, anyway I'm fine without. By the way, I've signed up for a psychology course, starting in September. I'm going to quit my job at the end of July.'

'That's great news, so no man and no children in the near future?'

'Yes, uh well no, it's all between the ears you know, when people get ideas in their head they just start to act like them.' We chatted on and on, sharing our philosophies. After the second bottle of wine we knew everything again about ourselves, mankind and how to change the world.

Three weeks later, on a Wednesday evening in March, Pinky dropped in. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes were as radiant as diamonds. We were watching en famille our favourite soap on the telly, so Pinky and I went to the kitchen. I poured her a glass of wine

and before we sat down she blurted out, 'I met him.' It took a while before I tuned in, still with my head in the intrigues of the soap.

'Met who?'

'Him, THE one!'

'You're kidding! Come on, tell me, when, how, who is he. Oh boy, you're a sly one '

'Last Friday I came home from a trip to Toronto. I was dead tired, in need of a hair wash and I wore that horrible pink jogging suit you gave me once. I hurried to the supermarket around the corner, which was about to close. I had to have a bottle of wine, a bag of crisps and a glossy to settle in for the night.'

'Crisps? You shouldn't eat them.'

'You know I'm addicted.'

'Anyway, go on.' I said, pulling my motherly face at her.

I passed the fish counter when he addressed me, a fat trout in his hand. He said to me, 'D'you know how to prepare these?' I shook my head in a 'no' and moved on. A bit rude I knew, so feeling guilty I turned around some ten feet further on. He stood there, so charming with one hand ruffling his blonde hair, in the other that massive trout. He wore an old leather motor bike jacket and far too wide corduroy trousers.'

'Sounds like Robert Redford in 'the Sting' to me.'

'Yeah in a way he was, with the same frank blue eyes. Anyway, before I knew it I reacted,

'I'm far too tired, perhaps another day.'

'Even more rude,' I said.

'Later I was in the queue at the till and he was standing behind me with two trout in his cart. He said, 'you look like you need a good meal.'

'Well he was probably right there,' I interrupted again.

'Shut up you,' Pinky said fiercely and went on, 'he said, Madam, I promise you won't regret it, if you allow me to cook this exquisite fish for you.'

'Even his speech is old-fashioned,' I interrupted again. Pinky threw me a mortified look and continued.

'I said, 'you're kidding, I'm dead tired, I have jet-lag and besides you don't even know me.'

'I know more about you than you know I know,' he replied, 'I'm actually living opposite you. My window faces onto yours, and I've been there for some time, I must add. You've never seen me?' I racked my brains, but I didn't remember ever seeing him. He went on, 'I've seen you come and go carrying a suitcase. Let me guess, tour guide?' He was so direct and easy, I was amazed. Within two minutes we were engrossed in each other. The girl behind the till became impatient, so he paid for the trout, I paid for the wine and together we went to his place.'

'Pinky, Pinky, so there he was after all, go on tell me everything, how old, what's his name, what's he doing?'

'He's called Adam and next week he'll be 40. I'm amazed I've never noticed him before because he's exactly my type. Strong and muscular but not a macho, he has a rather well developed feminine side and we can talk about everything. It's not so much his looks, his face is rather bony and angular but it's the way he moves, the elegance of his stride that attracts me; he talks with his hands and he laughs a lot, he is incredible funny. And Liz, it's just heaven to be enveloped in his arms; this mixture of scents like leather, turpentine and fresh male sweat,' she said in a daze.

'So the chemistry is alright but what does he do?' I tried to sound like a father checking out the future prospects of his son in law

'He is an artist, a painter. He lives in his studio, between huge canvasses. Paint and the smell of oil are everywhere. It's sparsely decorated with only a few pieces of second hand furniture.'

'And how was the trout?'

'Fantastic, I never tasted them.'

'You didn't eat them?'

'Yes, we did, he cooked them, while I sat on the table, well table, it's more like a few pallets nailed together in his makeshift kitchen. I sipped wine and ate crisps, while he made me talk. Can you believe it, for the first time I've met a man who's interested in me, who asks me

questions and listens when I speak. Then we ate, but I'm not aware of actually finishing my plate. Don't laugh, but I fell asleep.'

'You fell asleep? How could you, when you were so close to clinching it with your ideal man?'

'No, no - it was perfect, he carried me to his couch and painted me. Hours later he kissed me awake. It was so sweet and funny and so natural and then of course it was fireworks. He settled down next to me on his ragged couch and we talked and laughed till dawn.' Pinkie's eyes became hazy again and she finished with, 'to make a long story short, the next morning we crossed the street to my place and the rest of the weekend we stayed in my bed.' Suddenly shy, she followed the lines on the chequered tablecloth. I went to her and threw my arms around her, 'Pinky, I'm so glad, this really sounds great.'

'Oh Liz, I'm so in love,' she sighed.

'Now you see how it works, once you're open and free inside, these things happen.' I couldn't help sounding rather moralistic but Pinky didn't mind. She stared into space, saying, 'How one can live with eyes shut. All these years I've going down blind alleys, while he lived right opposite me.'