

SECTION FOUR: COLUMNS ABOUT DATING

HOT DATES: confessions of a single girl

Each week I get bag loads of mail from many lonely people wanting to meet someone. They give me their personal details in the hope that I will publish their letters. They pray that their soul-mate will just happen to be passing and will be attracted by this obscure beacon in the fog. Exposed and vulnerable they wait patiently to be discovered.

And every now and again I run such letters even though they are not relevant to a sex page - for a deeply personal reason. You see, I too was once a lonely heart crying out for my soul-mate, waiting for that one-in-a-million chance that "he" was passing when I was calling out from the darkened pages of newsprint.

It was a few years ago when I was writing a lifestyle column. I would often reveal my feelings and darkest secrets as I believe a writer must in order to inspire honesty in others, and expose the illusions of life.

But my hidden agenda was that someone would read my words and recognise me to be his woman. Spotting my vulnerability and virtues, he would then come for me, or so the myth went. My friends all used to laugh at me. "You'll never meet anyone this way," they would chide. We'd all gone through the rigours of personal ads, letters, dating agencies and phone services. It never worked. In fact, we had all had a string of disastrous blind dates.

The column did attract quite a swathe of male admirers. I often received letters from men who sounded almost too good to be true. Having bought the hype for too many years, I dismissed the photos of good lookers, and the success stories, and waited. Then one day I received an unusual letter from a man. It stunned me with its honesty. It was a particularly brave letter. The writer was obviously in a lot of pain.

He spoke to me about his fears. He was going through a nasty divorce and was frightened that he had failed. He wondered aloud what being a "successful" human being really meant. His nakedness jumped out at me and I even shed a tear as I am apt to do when my readers reveal themselves to me.

A week later the next letter came. He spoke of things I had said in previous columns. He had been listening to me very carefully. He offered his philosophies and talked as if he'd known me for ever. Though I was intrigued, I was also convinced that he must be a nutter. Despite the fantasy, I was suspicious of someone who could take such an interest in the ravings of a person they'd never met, particularly a journalist.

But I found myself waiting each week for the letters. And each week they came. I found myself carrying them around, laughing, crying, as this man's life unfolded to me. And one day, overcome with affection, I picked up the phone and did what I had never done before. I rang this crazy reader and asked him out on a date.

"This is dangerous," cautioned my mother. My friends all shook their heads in disbelief. I knew it was foolish and I was nervous. But I felt strangely compelled to meet him. I spent days wondering what he'd look like. Before he arrived at the restaurant we had chosen, I drank three straight whiskies. Then into the restaurant he came.

I could smell the waves of his aftershave before I saw him. He looked nothing like I had imagined. Though he was a beautiful man, he wore clothes from the 70s. The floral shirt was so loud it almost knocked me over. The flared trousers were a trip. It later occurred to me that he was trapped in some time warp as many divorced men are. They often dress the way they used to dress on dates, before they were married.

But it didn't matter. It didn't matter what he was wearing or what he was going to say next. Because my trembling body told me that I was looking at the face of the man I was going to marry. And marry him I did.

It gives me enormous satisfaction to tell this story because often I get letters from angry people who say they don't know how my poor husband copes with a wife who exposes her sexual secrets and worst of all his secrets each week in the paper.

Well my husband is now my literary confidant. And he has gone from letter writer to letters editor, sitting with me each week and lovingly reading through and sorting all my mail.

He married me knowing exactly who I am. And this is the only definition of true love. Someone who loves you for what you are, not for what they want you to be. I only hope that by publishing a few lonely-hearts letters every so often, I can give someone else the opportunity to know love like this.

Together we have gone back to some of the stories I wrote during my dating days and chosen the ones that most amuse us. We particularly like my horror dates and the stories that elucidate the confusion and indeed loneliness of playing the dating game. PSYCHOPATHS I HAVE LOVED is the one that makes me laugh the most, written after a string of horror dates. I remember feeling at the absolute end of my tether at the time. Even reading it now brings back the frustration and anguish I felt.

I just finished reading a story about a girl who was so lonely and so desperate to meet the man of her dreams, she put herself in the window of a bridal shop so she could attract a mate. I know how she felt. I think there should be a street in all the major capital cities around the world where singles can stand in shop windows the way prostitutes do in the red-light district of Amsterdam, and advertise their wares.

How else are we to connect in this lonely world? It is a sign of the times that when I offered my readers the chance to have a few lonely-hearts letters published on my page, I was totally bombarded with sack-loads full of mail.

In the next two chapters I make the transition from single to married life. But as my final story in this chapter THE FLIP SIDE reveals, neither is a perfect world.

PSYCHOPATHS I HAVE LOVED

The dating game is fraught with unwelcome surprises. At first the male peacock, chest full of hot air, colourful plumage wafting in the sunlight, crows and displays his throbbing red Porsche's to draw you into the dance of love. Then he woo's you into the Jacuzzi of life whilst taking you on a guided tour of his monumental intellect.

All the while you quiver in you high-heeled, come-love-me, shoes waiting, waiting, for the fatal flaw to be revealed. What's the problem? you wonder as you sip champagne and hear how much he loves to shower women with sweetness.

And then it comes like a shot of whisky on an empty stomach. The crack in the glass. The reality check.

Like a recent date - intelligent, funny, attractive, and very generous with his cash - who after two fun dates took me to his apartment to show me his etchings. The etchings were of himself. Big, massive self-portraits in every room. Photographs,

drawings, paintings with halogen lights trained on the images in case it wasn't clear who you were looking at.

Then there was the one who loved theatre, opera and art. He was attractive and kind. He loved Italian cooking. He got quite enthused during our viewing of the video "Matador" which is a gory and intriguing bit of Spanish film making. He admitted he liked the concept of death. In fact, he thought the necrophiliac in the film was "grossly misunderstood".

There was the one who used to iron his hair and the one who made a bizarre clicking noise with his mouth when he chewed food.

But my favourite reality check came with a man who I met at Club Med. There I was, quietly minding my own business. He came strolling by, with his plastic Club Med money beads draped round his hairy chest. Advertising his wealth like an old Indian chief. He had knotted them into color sequence orange-yellow-red, orange-yellow-red.

I should have known. But like so many women of my generation, I was so busy waiting for the arrival of the prince on his white horse, for the eternal happiness I had been promised, that I could only see a golden halo as I looked up at his sun-observed form.

"Hi," he said, beaming down at me, all gold and beads and white teeth and sunshine like a big Inca god. "Can I join you?"

I recognised him at once from some women's magazine article on wealthy, available eligible bachelors.

He sat down next to me and bought me a drink, which meant that two orange beads were forced to run together on his necklace. He said he hated that. I thought he was joking.

He strutted about getting himself comfortable like a giant peacock in full plume. He was very handsome when he didn't smile. He said: "How many Club Meds have you been to?" I said: "This is my first." He said: "I've been to Thailand, Acapulco....." and on he went listing every region of the world. I should have known.

But love was already getting in the way. Love or neediness, which are both the same anyway, for women of marrying age.

On the beach that day, he read me a poem he'd written that he happened to be carrying around with him. It was ghastly. But I was dazzled anyway. Dazzled because he was single and rich and intelligent. And he was good looking if you discounted the nicotine-stained teeth. Dazzled because it was Summer and I was hot and sweaty, and ready, so, so ready to fall in love. Dazzled because he wanted me.

By the end of the week we were lovers. He asked me to go steady with him when we got home. I agreed.

I should have known. But hope is a powerful smoke screen. The opiate of the female masses. I had noticed the color-coded socks in the drawers. I had noticed the way he arranged all his clothes in the cupboard like a rainbow prism from white to black, and that he would wear only the darker colors as the week wore on until Sunday was black. I was amused. I thought he was funny.

But one day on the beach he became angry: "That's not how it is done," he said scornfully.

"What?" I asked, truly miffed.

"That's not how you eat icecream!" he growled. "I'll show you the right way," and he snatched the cone from my hand and proceeded to lick around the cream. "Counter-clockwise", he yelled, growing very distressed, "Counter-clockwise! You must always eat an icecream counter-clockwise."

"Or else?" I asked, growing alarmed. He glared at me in shock, as if I had worn red on a blue day, or put his pink socks behind the brown ones in his drawer. I knew the answer. The same fate would befall you if you stood on the lines on the pavement. The bears would get you.

Now you, my precious readers, may think I am an overly fussy woman. My mother certainly does. I am not. We all have dreadful character flaws. Skeletons in the closet. I know I have mine. But it's a matter of what perversions and idiosyncrasies can you tolerate. For instance indecisiveness has never bothered me as much as say selfishness.

Hence, I have always believed that the dating game should go as follows to avoid disappointment and wasted time:

"Okay, lay it on the line. I can see all the good bits. I can see your clear green eyes. I can see you know your T.S. Eliot. What's your perversion? What's the fundamental problem? How are you a psychopath?"

"Oh well, I am filthy rich but I can't part with a penny. I'm mean. I mean "mean". I am so mean I'd strap myself to the wing of the plane to avoid buying a ticket. I'm so mean I keep bread for six months and just scrape off the green bits. I make tea without the bag just to save a few cents. I collect used bottles to get the one-cent refund.

"What's your kink?"

"Oh, I'm fine. It's just that I turn into a sociopath around THAT time of the month. For one week in every four I turn into a swamp creature. A quarter of our lives together I will be a putrid, vile-tempered beast. A stinking, growling, horrid, mass of man-hating flesh. But I'm fine the rest of the time. What do you say? Is there a love match?"

I think most people would agree with me on this one. You gotta put your bad bits on display. It isn't that the perpetually-single expect our dates to have no flaws. It's just that we want to find out about them before we take our pants down. That's all.

HOCUS POCUS

Women, I have noticed, will go to any extent to net the man they love, the objet d'amour. Which is why love potions and voodoo dolls are doing such a roaring trade at the moment through reputable retail outlets.

Forget sexy lingerie and heady perfume. There are packages women can buy that teach them how to cast spells and catch dreams. There is even a marriage voodoo doll on the market to leave under the pillow at night.

I read recently that there are over 40,000 people in this country who admit to practicing a form of magic or witchcraft. I believe a huge percentage of them are women searching for love. I know this readers because - and I prey to Beelzebub my grandmother does not read this - for a time I was a witch.

I was a witch from the ages 21 to 22 running around in circles under the moon chanting Latin anti-hymns in an ominous voice.

The group I joined was a derivative of an ancient witchcraft coven that had become popular again in Europe at the turn of the century. Its members were committed to saving Mother Earth. The modern equivalent is the anti-logging, Dolphin-talkers, many of whom are also white witches or Pantheists. There are large communities of them living in mountainous, spiritual, regions around the country.

Anyway I must confess, that like many of the people I met through the coven, my motives were not pure. I joined not to save the planet but for one simple reason. "D". He was my English professor at a Melbourne university where I was studying for a year following my cadetship with the Age Newspaper. I loved him. He was oblivious to me. Classic stuff. But I had to have him.

In class he taught us about the poet Yeats who was a member of a white-magic Cabbalistic coven and who used the symbols in his poetry. In art history class I was studying Kandinsky who was also a member of the same cult of mystics. What was the universe trying to tell me?

I found out when I started dating "N" who one night, after Chinese dinner, revealed he was a warlock and that there was a white-witch coven on campus. It all made cosmic sense. I would draw D to me by hocus pocus. I thought all my black Sabbaths had come at once.

This is still a time of youth you understand, when people tend to believe they have some control over the order of things, can change the world, can make people love them. Youth, when people still believe they and their lives are special in some magical way.

I had grown up on a diet of Star Trek, the Outer Limits, the Twilight Zone, Bewitched. There was magic out there: new galaxies and exotic creatures, men who were wise and beautiful and honest like Captain James Kirk. There was another dimension full of strange beings. There was power over one's destiny for those who possessed magic objects. I was still clinging to these hopes even though the years I had spent as a cadet journalist focusing on world chaos, steeped in the routine of finding parking spots and working off fat thighs, all hinted that this may not be the case.

But I wanted it to be the case, desperately, like so many who were drawn into the sect. For I have never since met such a group of misfits. Our "temple" - for want of a better word - was inhabited by the fattest, saddest souls I had ever encountered. People who could not string a sentence together, who looked like walking zombies, who had been abandoned by parents, unemployed, helpless, hopeless. All looking for the magic, all looking for love.

Night after night I would listen to their unmagical stories of abuse and loneliness while we would wobble around in ritualistic circles, make the sign of the Pentacles in the air, and believe in the forces of Nature. K was "in a bad relationship scene" with a woman who did not appreciate his midnight mass sessions. E was an alcoholic. Some "witches" were students, others just drop-ins from Beelzebub knows where - off the street I guess.

It took two years of devotion to gain admission into the inner sanctums of the sect. But just about anyone could participate in early ritual. The "temple" itself was a clapped out, draughty, old warehouse in the Western suburbs with mystical signs painted childishly on the peeling walls. I was always too cold to go naked under the thin black robe, so I always kept my black skivvy and stockings on underneath,

frightened that our leader would - through his third eye - see my deception. He never did.

The candles always went out from the draft so we settled for desk-lights with red rags thrown over them for affect. Because most of us were unemployed or poor, we made do with a cardboard, fold-a-way, pentacle and a plastic chalice. Our leader was an obese hippie in his 30s. His wife could "channel" and become other people. Sometimes, he told me looking worried, she would become someone else and disappear for days on end - with other men. Off in a puff of smoke! Magic is a bit like that. Precarious stuff really.

My mother caught me once on the veranda singing long words beginning with "Omni.." and making the sign of the pentacles with my hand. She thought I was singing a rock song and doing some new dance craze. She left me alone.

I studied Tarot cards and dream symbols, and for a short, blissful, while, had a majestic purpose to my life.

Sex came into it. The group believed that through sex-magic and controlled orgasm you could project love and positive energy into the world, a sexual philosophy not dissimilar to those of Eastern religions. I really think that that's what a lot of them were there for. But I never practiced sex-magic with the cult members. I was still very much of the physical world, unable to go beyond the blubber and large hairy beards, and hopeless eyes of these bewildered people.

And I had "D" - the incarnation of beauty, wisdom and eroticism - who one day toppled of his lectern with fatigue and didn't come back for the rest of the year.

I grew disgruntled, sad, unable to eat. It was not the ultimate loss of D, rather the loss of that magic object from childhood that I mourned. I guess, in retrospect, that is as good a definition as any of growing up. Realising that you can't always have what you want, that there is only this dimension, and the only reality is what you see before you.

I recently stood on a remote beach where a spacecraft was believed to have landed, looking up at the night sky and hoping to catch a glimpse of one. Hoping against logic to be one of those unique souls snatched away from domestica by little green men and taken to exotic new galaxies. "Beam me up Scotty. Before last night's dishes have to be washed and the bills paid."

I know I will spend the rest of my life staring up at the sky waiting for Captain Kirk. But as I grow older I am learning that the real magic is not in the outer limits. It is in being able to accept and enjoy this frightening, uncertain and often precarious existence, the way it is. To treasure what you've got. And ultimately, to stop yearning for what or who you cannot have.

DINOSAURS

As the world changes and progresses so quickly, it is nice to know there are still bastions of civilisation that have not altered at all. Where backward thinking is a way of life. Places which haven't been ruined by New Age hog-wash such as a vicious rumour someone spread that women were equal to men, and were useful as more than sex objects.

The charming old world I speak of is the nightclub scene of Australia which still adheres to traditional values.

Yes, here, under the strobe lights - hunting ground of the old-fashioned sleazebag and the native greaseball - it is refreshing to rediscover yourself for what you really are. No highbrow intellectual. Just a walking pair of tits.

Out of interest myself and a childhood girlfriend returned the haunts of our youth, in both Sydney and Melbourne to see what had changed.

Along the way we discovered a host of new nightspots that have sprung up in the wake of multiculturalism - Greek clubs, Spanish joints, even an all-black African disco in Melbourne, jam-packed with people in dreadlocks. The new haunts were as delightfully "traditional" as the great Aussie discotheque.

For instance, at a Spanish club I visited, I met a charming, old-fashioned type called Carlos who reminded me of my purpose in the scheme of things.

I had gone to see the Flamenco dancing the place is famed for. As I watched the show, I could see Mr Cool watching me. He stood against the wall. His hair was dyed black and severely blow-waved (or it could have been a hairpiece. I didn't want to look too closely).

He sported an orange shirt, open to the waist, a large gold chain and tight, tight, tight, black, flared polyester pants, a walking caricature of 1970s chic. He was chain smoking which probably accounted for the state of his skin: crinkle-cut.

I could see from his leer that unfortunately I was his type. I tried to ignore him. To no avail. I smelt his cheap aftershave before I saw him. Then he swept me up into riveting dialogue. He said: "Hey beby, you wanna dance wid me?"

I said: "No thanks."

He said: "C'mmon honey. You dance wid me."

I said: "No thanks."

He said: "You very beaudiful. You Spanish?" I said: "No."

He said: "You Aussie girl, Westie?" I said: "No."

He said: "That's good,"

He grinned at me, revealing the nicotine-stained teeth he had left in his head, and after a few more slimy come ons, he said: "In Spain a man takes what he want. I take you." Then he grabbed my wrist and started dragging me towards the dance floor.

Thankfully, a woman appeared who seemed to belong to Carlos. On seeing her he immediately let go of my wrist and rather dramatically Flamincoed her backward on to the dance floor. She, drunk, stumbled backwards, tripping over her seven inch heels as he rammed her like a bull on heat. The testosterone seemed to flare in his body as he cornered his conquest. "Ole!"

Carlos, was, admittedly one of the more aggressive types of traditionalist. Often these hunters are far smoother and more subtle in their approach to us sex objects.

Like the one that tried to pick me up at the African joint in Melbourne. I was getting into the Reggae with a girlfriend, burning off calories to the funky beat, when again, I noticed I was being watched.

Suddenly I saw some large man moon-walking towards me. You know, doing those little Michael Jackson dance steps. "Oh no," my friend and I moaned to each other as the prize cock got closer.

He was an older man. Black, with an American accent. He was rather elegantly dressed in dinner attire with a hat. The only problem was he glowed in the dark. He was florescent.

He must have sprayed clock-dial paint all over the white bits before going wooing. I guess it attracted the opposite sex to him in a way that being flat finish or matt finish didn't do.

He said: "Hi, girls." All eyes were upon this cool, presumably radioactive, daddy-o dude, who was obviously admired by the male throng.

I stared into his luminous eyeballs and then into his glowing mouth, crammed with huge white-green teeth. Then he started showing off, moon-walking his glowing shoes around us in funky circles to the beat, moving his florescent gloved hands in the air (to show what he could do to my body presumably) and tipping his hat, while other males clapped him on and said "Ooooooow."

I desperately wanted to laugh but I couldn't be cruel to a man so confused about women, so insecure, he had to wear clock dial so I smiled politely and tried to walk away. But daddy-o was right on my tail. "Where you from baby?" he yelled at my back. "Hey girl. Don't be rude, sugar. Where you from?"

My girlfriend and I ducked into the ladies and waited for ten minutes. By the time we emerged daddy-o had cornered another mama, a well-endowed blonde.

At a leading disco in Sydney I was accosted by many a dribbling beer-gutted male while at a Melbourne Greek club I attracted the attention of the head Honcho who was smashing dishes everywhere. As each pile crashed to the floor he grinned at me, growing more excited and edging closer. His hairy chest oozed from his open shirt. Soon it became obvious he was smashing the plates for me.

"Throw," he suddenly yelled to me, as all eyes fell upon me. Not quite knowing what to do, I picked up a plate next to me and as it hit the floor, the crowd yelled "Yasoo!"

"Yasoo baby, yasso," he yelled, taking my hand and dancing around wreckage. After ten minutes, no longer able to contain his profound admiration for me, he said: "You wanna F... wid me?"

I like the fact that these old dinosaurs still roam the earth. It is good to go visit them occasionally in their native hunting grounds, because they are a good reminder of how things used to be on the outside, and how far we've come. Oh ladies! Lest We Forget!

TOY BOYS

At my 30th birthday party I was given a most unexpected surprise. Having suffered a broken heart, yet again, my friends thought I needed perking up. Specially since mother mum reminded me over the phone about a statistic she had recently read: that a woman past the age of 30 had as much chance of getting hitched as being hit by a meteorite.

I felt down on my luck, so some close girlfriends announced to my guests that they would have to whisk me away at the stroke of midnight to give me a present that would lift my spirits.

The night was suspenseful. Everyone kept making jokes about what was waiting for me. Why did I have to be removed? How high would my spirits be lifted? Wasn't it something that could have been given to me in the restaurant? Could I eat it?

No, it couldn't be given to me at the restaurant they said. Yes, I could eat it if I really wanted. I was intrigued.

At midnight I was driven to a well-known luxury hotel in the city and given a room number. Because my girlfriends are delightfully sane and intelligent people, I didn't hesitate to follow their orders. They didn't accompany me.

After a nerve-racking ride up the elevator I knocked on the door. A very handsome man answered and lead me inside. He had a large bow on his lapel with a birthday card attached. The card had a Use-By date: "Within 24 hours". Inside the card my friends had written: "Reality can be better than fantasy."

I stood there in total shock, my mouth quivering with amusement, anger, surprise and embarrassment. This Robert Redford clone with cleft chin and blonde hair had a bottle of French champagne sitting in a bucket of ice. He smiled at me and began to chat about the weather, the hotel, while I knocked back a few drinks to steady myself.

I really wanted to collect my bag and coat and dart out of there. But the weirdest feeling of obligation kept washing over me. I figured my friends had all put in a considerable amount of money to get the room, the French plonk and the toy-boy to cheer me up on my birthday.

I knew I had to stick around for a short while, if only to justify some of the expenditure. Also I was very curious to find out how the whole thing had come about.

After regaining my composure I ascertained that Mr Redford was actually a professional man who did some "call-boying" at nights. Just to earn a bit of cash. His business had gone under in the late 80s and he drove a taxi, and offered himself to horny, often corporate women as an escort to help ends meet, so to speak. He was an excellent masseuse he assured me having trained in several Eastern disciplines.

I felt myself growing more curious, particularly since I like cleft chins. They sort of make me want to put my tongue in them, and twirl it around.

But I was still far too embarrassed to twirl, and being an intuitive kinda guy he reassured me that it was fine to just talk and drink champagne if that's what I wanted. Occasionally his female clients just needed to "unburden" themselves or talk it out. Some just wanted company when they went to corporate events. Others, of course, wanted more.

Oddly, I suddenly felt a surge of pride. It was wonderful to think that women were now moving into the erotic domain of men. That women having now clawed their way up the greasy pole, having now reclaimed some of the power, were exploiting its potential. I had never adhered to the generalisation that women always wanted "nice", meaningful sex.

He agreed that plenty of women liked it wild and raunchy, or uncomplicated and without the sweet icing on top. Plenty of women had moved beyond "erotic" the tag always given to female sexuality, into "hard core." The thing about escorts that was so

enticing to women, he explained, was that the men always wore condoms and were far more conscious of safe sex than your average one night stand.

"If the ladies are still a bit nervous, I can always just give them a massage," he said, cocking his eyebrow at me.

"Mmmm," I said, staring into his cleft chin and wondering.....

When I told my other friends about my birthday present they were outraged. The mere fact that I had spent the evening with an escort, regardless of what I had or hadn't done, was considered shocking, unbelievable, or just plain bad.

But I was interested to read recently that the trade in male escorts is now thriving in Australia. New services catering for female clientele are opening all the time with men charging themselves out at anything from \$50 to \$150 an hour.

As women's sexual appetites grow, the stigma on having these appetites decreases. Sex shops for females are burgeoning around the world. Women are out of the erotic closet and into a whole range of specifically tailored products: soft porn, dildos shaped like whales, snakes and goddesses, vibrators shaped like butterflies.

Basically women are evolving their own sexual language and expression and the trend to escorts, and toy boys, is part of this new sexual evolution. The best thing about it is that single women who are lonely and frustrated, no longer have to sit at their birthday parties crying into their beer.

Indeed not. Although I'm not the kind to pay and tell, from what I have gathered, the only crying they will be doing, will be crying for joy.

WHEN YOUR NUMBER'S UP

As a young, single girl, I was always looking for reasons to explain away my loneliness and the sad break-ups that I used to endure with frightening regularity.

I kept my head above water by rationalising that there was some cosmic significance to it all - that it was my destiny to suffer romantic deprivation in preparation for that special man who would chance along one day soon.

To help matters along I would often frequent sooth-sayers, psychics and the like who would counsel me in matters of Fate and how I could use it to find love. "Go to Paris, he awaits you there," offered one. "He is close by. Perhaps he even lives next door," contradicted another a week later.

One day, fresh from a bout of romantic disappointment, I went to consult a man reputed to be one of the most respected numerologists in the world. I needed to know where to be, and how to prepare for the big moment of "falling in love".

Rohinini was a psychic who could tell a person's destiny by adding up their birth date. He used a system based on ancient wisdom, tracing his knowledge of "the spiritual properties of numbers" back to formulas from measurements of King Solomon's temple and the Pyramids of Egypt. Friends had told me he was so accurate it was "totally scary."

Most fortunately, this maestro of the supernatural was based in our very own Australia. I sat in the lounge room of his little flat blowing my nose and lamenting the pain of love gone wrong. Rohinini soothed me with words of cosmic sympathy while he tallied up the figures.

"Oh wow. That's it! You are a nine. That explains it."

My heart was thumping. I knew there was a reason my life had turned out the way it had.

He said: "Nine...wow! God, that is such a special number." And then went on to talk about me in a way that gave me chills up my spine. "You are always searching for meaning. You feel frustrated because the meaning of life keeps alluding you..."

"Yes, yes..Oh yes."

"There is a lot of sadness around love for you because reality never matches your expectations."

"Yes, yes..how true."

"But you will meet someone very soon. I can see him. He is tall and handsome. A man involved in money...perhaps a wealthy business tycoon. He will seek you out."

"Oh Rohinini, how can the numbers know so much about me?" I asked when the awesome session had finished. I was trembling. I wanted to kiss Rohinini's fat, thonged feet.

"They just know," he said earnestly.

I asked him to show me how he worked out that I was a nine. He started adding up the numbers for me. "First take your day of birth - 26th. Two plus six equals eight, then add the month, then the year. Remember the final number must be a digit between one and ten."

"But that all adds up to 35 which is three plus five which is eight," I said as he scrawled down figures.

"Oh... um....errr....eight. Yes. Sorry you are correct. You are actually an eight not a nine," he stammered, turning red.

There was an awful moment of silence. Then he said: "Look, it doesn't matter really. I mean, ummm, eight and nine are on the same grid so in reality they have almost identical traits." He quickly tallied some new figures and said, "That will be \$45, Ruth," and pushed me out the front door.

"But am I still special? And what about the handsome man?" I almost sobbed as he pushed me quickly into the street and into the grips of a cosmic identity crisis. There is nothing lonelier than losing your sacred number and your promising future.

I never received an answer from Rohinini nor did I meet Mr Handsome who was probably swanning around with some number nine.

I was reminded of this sorry tale whilst watching late-night tele recently. Amidst all the advertisements for telephone dating, there was one for some psychic hotline. Playing to the lonely-hearts audience the ad promised that people could ring up and find out whether love was around the corner. I felt a twinge of anger.

The next day I rang a woman I know who works for a similar service and she confirmed that for her it is all about being a good psychologist. "You tell people what they want to hear. You sell them their dreams. It doesn't hurt them to feel optimistic that love is soon going to come their way. Sometimes it even helps."

Someone said those same words to me recently when I told them how much I had paid for my face cream.

"Dreams in a bottle," he laughed. "You pay because you need to be lied to. You need to believe you're not going to wrinkle up and die."

And was he wrong? If Rohinini had gotten his numbers right I'd have danced out on cloud "nine". In retrospect, paying \$45 for a pair of rose-colored glasses and a large dose of joy, was a real bargain.

WHO PAYS?

A few two years ago, I was asked out on a date by a very amicable and pleasant-looking businessman.

We went out for a walk around a park and fed swans by the lake. It was a charming afternoon, if you discount the fact I was bitten by a swan, and so I accepted a dinner invitation.

Through the meal we discussed why he was so screwed up, and why he thought he was not able to be in a relationship for very long and of course, what his therapist thought. It was a meal that reminded me of an old joke: Now let's talk about you. What do YOU think about me?

Then bill came. He picked it up and glared at it for a long, long time. A long time. Longer than I had seen anyone look at a bill before. I began to think that the meaning of life was written on the paper in invisible ink.

My date moved his docket-clutching hand close to his face and then further back, never lifting his eyeballs from the page. Back, forward, back, forward. Finally he pulled out \$70 and put it in the tray.

I thought nothing of the incident. A few days later he popped in to see me on the way to an appointment and forgot his diary. When I went to put the diary in a safe place it fell open to the night of our dinner date because there was a book-mark inserted in that week.

There was an entry which I will never forget. It said: "Had dinner with Ruth. Paid \$70 for nothing."

The proverbial "penny" then dropped. The performance with the bill was like putting coins in a slot machine and then pulling down to see if you hit the jackpot. My friend wasn't sure if he wanted to invest in an uncertain outcome and so was holding off paying for my dinner hoping that I may make some utterance that signalled an increase in odds - a more certain shower of gold coins like: "Let's go to your apartment for coffee." When I made him drop me off at the door, he felt cheated.

A week later, still reeling with anger, I accepted a dinner invitation from a sophisticated man who had the marvellous mixture of being both a lawyer and author of self-help books.

At the end of the meal he did not hesitate to throw his credit card into the tray, bragging about how successful he was. I invited him in for coffee. While the coffee brewed, he excused himself and went upstairs to the bathroom. He never came down, so I went upstairs only to discover him sitting on my bed - waiting.

Then came a sequence that looked like something out of a slapstick movie. He chased me around my room and down stairs while I yelled and threw things at him.

Eventually he went home. He rang the next day to tell me he was never going to invite me to dinner again. He had never been so insulted in his life. "You made me feel I was being totally rejected," he yelled.

"You were being totally rejected," I yelled back. "Then why did you let me buy you dinner?" he huffed.

"I didn't think that taking a girl for dinner gave you automatic entry into her private quarters," I huffed back.

I remembered a girlfriend of mine telling me that during a date with this man, he pushed her into a telephone box and kissed her brutally. This was after he bought her coffee and cake.

Things became much clearer for me once I had worked out the equation: one coffee equals one kiss.

I found that this formula was pretty standard and eventually wouldn't let a man buy me a sandwich given that a sandwich could potentially rate anywhere between a coffee and a four-course meal.

In fact, nearly half of men interviewed in a recent American survey felt entitled to pressure a woman from lightly to heavily for sex after they had paid for four consecutive dates, while a significant 43 per cent of men would stop seeing a woman if she had not "delivered" by the fifth date regardless of who was footing the bill.

When I lived in New York I found that because most women were financially independent, allowing oneself to be "paid for" was often construed as just that, at least after more than one date. On arriving home, I was horrified to see that the problem had gotten just as bad here. That awful question kept coming up. Who pays and what does paying mean? Because in the 90s men and women are as confused as they have ever been about where to draw the line.

Paying for dinner denotes something that "going Dutch" does not. Implicit in it is a large degree of sexual politics, power and role playing. It is impossible to know what your dinner guest's expectations are and trying to work it out subtly when the bill arrives is enough to give anyone severe indigestion.

Will a woman be offended if her date continues to pay or think he's mean if he doesn't? If she accepts does that mean there is romantic potential? Or that she is going to be a financial burden for ever more? If she offers to pay half or insists on buying dinner, does it mean she wants to "just be friends"? If he pays, does he have a right to expect anything and how does money influence the power-base of a relationship?

I have found that this confusion goes well beyond paying for dinner. Many of us, as baby-boomers, have inherited two strong ways of thinking: traditional 50s, and hip post-70s consciousness. On some issues liberated people can regress back to childhood conditioning: "This is what my dad did so it must be right."

It is impossible to know which mentality will dominate any given situation. The result is we often misconstrue our friends' motives, and feel hurt or rejected when our own expectations are not fulfilled.

The 90s are a difficult time for us socially. Men and women are not sure anymore of what is "right" behaviour. Unlike our parents' times, there are no more guidelines or stringent moral rules.

"Who pays?" just highlights the mess we are in as we struggle to redefine our roles, what is politically correct gastronomical behaviour and to work out what is really meant by the simple words: "Can I buy you a coffee?"

MOVING IN

After a decade of singledom, moving in with a bloke - as in living together - can cause certain hiccups to one's lifestyle.

As I am clearly not the first to experience these minor tremors I thought I might ask advice from those brave souls who have trodden this path before me.

The most obvious first problem is how does one continue to remain glamorous and attractive to one's partner, indeed to retain the romance, in the face of such crushing intimacy.

Should one, for instance, be advised to set one's alarm for ten minutes before a partner's awakening so one can paint eyes onto the amorphous glob that has become one's face overnight?

Should one attempt to wash out the creases that have set into one's cheeks? Or does one allow one's beloved to realise that one's head tends to fold in on itself during the night?

If one's beloved's head has also caved in, particularly after a long, alcoholic evening, does one offer useful suggestions on grooming or does one pretend not to notice? Are dark glasses appropriate breakfast apparel? Is it rude to hide out behind the newspaper?

What about personal hygiene and sexual attraction? I once knew a man who kept a glass of mouth wash and an empty bowl by his bed so he could "wash out the bottom of the dirty bird cage," before his beloved reached across for a morning kiss. Is this extreme behaviour or is it to be advised?

Does one continue to wear the favourite, old flannelette nightie - a guaranteed form of contraception - with fluffy rabbit slippers, or does one buy a negligee and silk wrap? Are earrings a stupid or intelligent part of the breakfast apparel?

Should a man attempt to dislodge hair which has formed a plastered-down bouffant around the forehead and ears overnight? What if like a friend, he has no hair? Does he quickly put on his rug before she awakens or should he be au naturel?

A girlfriend told me about the time she discovered her man wore a rug.

She had come down to breakfast and noticed his face looked slightly bloated on the left side. She thought he may have developed mumps. On closer inspection, she saw he was wearing a hairpiece and had stuck on slightly crooked. Seems he had been in too great a rush to secure the thing before she woke up.

One guy I knew used to sew shoulders pads into his pyjamas to hide the fact he had no muscles. At what stage does one tell the truth about such things? And at what stage does one stop hiding the other things: one's haemorrhoid cream or potions for ulcers, tinea and sclerosis of the scalp? One's reaction to onions?

At what point does one cease from the exhausting process of slipping into something more revealing or less revealing, diving into showers, into mouth washes, into bathrooms, spraying scented goo on your body, around the room, trying to retain some semblance of dignity?

What is natural? What is gross? What is artificial, what is domestic etiquette? Because from this vantage point I have no clues. I have come to realise that whatever numerous and wonderful benefits come with the state called "intimacy", there is little dignity in it.

A friend of mine who recently moved in with her beloved told me on the weekend that she lamented the loss of true privacy. She said that for many years she had snuck around her own home with comfort and security, looking ugly when she felt like it, sporting hair-curlers and sloppy joes. Enjoying her little depressions. Some days never getting dressed at all.

She always enjoyed juxtaposing these "off" and slothful days with the excitement of dating her boyfriend. Buying a lovely garment, preening herself, looking and feeling beautiful after a few days of hibernation and relaxation from a world that poet T.S Eliot described as forcing us to "prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet."

Now in this strange hybrid state called "living together" she felt called upon to abandon both the romance of dating and yet also the security of marriage. She said: "People are left revealing their most personal habits, leaving themselves open to raw scrutiny, without guaranteed acceptance. Ironically what is probably needed to help commit-a-phobes make the leap into a heavier scene (marriage) is heaps of blinding romantic bliss."

A male friend who has been cohabiting with his girlfriend for three years and is still unable to make the final commitment laughed and admitted that: "Living together is like letting a buyer over-examine your second-hand car. If you let him take it for six days instead of an hour he's bound to turn up trouble."

Using the same metaphor another male friend said he'd never live with anyone because: "It's like if you bought a car and found it had faults you would rationalise your decision and convince yourself the problems were only small. If you hadn't yet bought you would be very, very, nervous about making the investment."

Could it be our grandparents were right in hanging out for the wedding night?

I do ponder the wisdom of this strange thing my generation does, called living together. I ponder on whether it is better to know about the tinea before or after final commitment. But more importantly I ponder the fate of my darling, treasured flannelette nightgown. The last daggy vestige of my former lifestyle.

To burn or not to burn. To do the dishes again or not to do the dishes again. To split the telephone bill or not to split the telephone bill. To eat onions or not to eat onions. That is the question.

SEXY KNICKERS

Never, never, never, wear sexy underwear when you go out on a hot date. Because you will only ever get lucky when you are wearing big, ugly, bloomers with holes in them, and you haven't shaved your legs for three months. Life is like this.

The minute you spend \$500 on a negligee, or some spivvy little knickers, you can kiss romance goodbye.

This profound wisdom has been passed down from woman to woman, mother to daughter, girlfriend to girlfriend, over the ages. It is a chillingly clever insight into the workings of the Cosmos, adapted from early Greek philosophy by the female species.

Taken on a purely superficial level, it can be sound, practical, advice. But if one chooses to go deeper, it holds the entire wisdom of existence and destiny: The universe is a random place. The universe is cruel and merciless. If you are egotistical, show `hubris' (human arrogance), pretend - mere mortal - that you can control Destiny, harness Fate, create your own reality, then you'll be scorned and mocked by an uncaring, contemptuous Cosmos.

Better put by Shakespeare: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport." Or my mum: "Expectation breeds disappointment."

My friend Elizabeth, a well-know journalist, recently conducted a year-long survey to verify this philosophy and discovered that ninety percent of woman were seduced the night they wore pathetic, daggy, bloomers or bumble-bee stretchy pants with stripes. And those who weren't seduced in their bloomers were happy anyway, because who'd want to be caught out in that state?

The point of all of this is that I, like Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks, discovered the hard way that you cannot prepare for, nor tame, Destiny. Free will is an illusion. To pretend otherwise, to expect, plan, and plot, is to court disaster.

And thus said, I must report to my fans on my tragic undoing at my own hand - like the metaphorical self-blinding of poor old Oedipus. I did not heed the signs. I turned my head and wantonly behaved with hubris.

A month ago I wrote about my unexpected and fated meeting of Harry. Since this time, I have been flooded with inquiries as to how things are progressing.

Well, soon after discovering Harry on the path of Life, I grew very uppity. I became rather self-confident, throwing in ancient female wisdom for the modern philosophical movements, telling my friends: "I willed it to happen, I saw him in my mind's eye and put in my order. You can achieve your desired outcome. You can make reality fit your visualisation."

Elizabeth, much experienced in the unpredictable ways of the world, got very panicky. "Don't buy any fancy underwear," she warned ominously, saying it was the female equivalent to a man carrying condoms in his back pocket on a hot date - it almost guarantees nothing will happen.

I laughed: "Oh come on you don't believe that stuff anymore? Don't be a victim for God's sake!"

She reminded me of her recent tragedy. She met a fantastic man. All rich and hot and panty. Things were really going well. Nothing awful happened, except for the night he got drunk and vomited in her car.

"Life is never this easy," she pondered, feeling very nervous indeed. "Will he die in a car crash?" But when he proposed, she suddenly forgot her humility. She was overcome with hubris, bragging to her girlfriends about what she had managed to achieve, gloating and floating and bloating up like a bubble fish. Within weeks he was gone from her life.

I listened to this with a scowl believing it to be the stuff of negative thinking. Not stuff of the 90s. Not the stuff about taking responsibility and creating your own outcome.

And with that, week two of my new romance, I went out in a rage of self empowerment and spent hundreds of dollars on lingerie.

I bought silky bra things and silk padded slippers and little lacy things that cost many dollars. The smaller and sillier, the more extravagant the price. Anything furry was over \$100 and if you wanted transparent, add another \$100. But damned the expense. It's an investment, I decided.

I lay around imagining all the fabulous erotic things that I was going to do in my silk muu muu. I could almost feel his strong hands around my waste. I choreographed all the moves in my head. I took control.

At that very moment it was decreed. Harry would mysteriously take a fork in the cross-road that pointed away from me and my new private collection of transparent things towards another single babe.

Of course I am sad about Harry but thankfully there are no signs of cancer or the worse afflictions the indifferent universe imposes on those with hubris. It was a gentle wake-up call from above. I have taken my unworn lingerie back and used the credit to purchase some Italian saucepans and a baking dish. I'm back to bloomers, no expectations, and savouring each good moment - with gratitude.

GETTING HIGH

How do you maintain a relationship with a 1990s person? It isn't easy because 1990s persons have so many choices, they never know if where they are, is better than where they've been - or where they could be.

So every now and again you have to let your 1990s person out of the cage to go for a bit of a wander, to sniff the greener grass, to amble freely in exotic new places, in the hope that your 1990s person will get severely mangled by an on-coming car and come limping gratefully back. I mean this metaphorically of course.

Your 1990s person will thus realise that the grass is not greener at all, just a little different. And, that wandering alone out in the big, wild world has many ugly dangers.

As I now lie here, with my foot up in traction, the bleeding, swollen mass of flesh tightly bandaged, I know that being let out of my cage for the weekend was the best thing my current permanent other could have done for our relationship. Not only was I metaphorically mangled by life, but my foot got quite literally crushed in the most horrible of circumstances.

The story goes as follows. On Friday night, I started pacing up and down the house with a snarly, irritable face.

It was the face of the 90s. The face of greed. The face that had spent the morning buried in glossy magazines reading about romance, adventure, and other people's exciting lives. The face that after many months in a happy, contented, committed relationship, wondered if it was missing out on something.

By Saturday morning the face was even snarlier. The jaws started snapping. By Saturday night my exhausted and long-suffering man opened the cage door and I went charging out with the girls looking for some action.

I had heard through the grape-vine that there was a party on for single people. I thought that this would be a good place to prowl around, have a few drinks and stretch out into that sumptuous space called freedom.

It had been a long time since I had gone to a singles party. A long time since I had been out without my new man who I'd been seeing for the past three months.

It was an "F" party where everyone had to dress up as something beginning with an "F". As I couldn't be bothered being anything special I put on too much mascara and went as Fabulous.

I was the only Fabulous there. There were three fairies: two of them were women in frilly, pink skirts, hair in buns with wands, one of them was a bloke in drag. There was a Furry, a bloke with a fur jacket and a pair of cat's ears. There was someone dressed up like Captain Cook. I spent quite a while trying to work out what he had to do with "F" until someone told me he was Famous. There were people in S & M garb, leather, lace and leopard skin suits which lead me to believe they just stuck on anything that would attract the opposite sex to them and they'd make up something "F"ish at the time like Fetish or Foxy.

For a while I just stood around listening to music and watching a man in very, very tight jeans and a headband chat up one of the female fairies. He looked as if all his Fs had come at once until another male F arrived, at which point the fairy went twinkling over to him, threw her arms around him and began kissing him passionately.

Mr Tight Crotch went skulking away, deciding to take on a less challenging F - a very overweight F in a caftan. I meanwhile decided to hit the punch.

About five punches down I got up and decided to have a little dance with myself. The music was loud and throbbing and it gave one the tingling feeling of passionate nights on hot beaches in exotic places. The floor suddenly filled with lots of twirling, single Fs who were all moving to the sounds of love.

My girlfriends had met two quite attractive Fs and had lost interest in me altogether. This is the first rule of being single which I had forgotten. If you meet someone, you may dump your girlfriend anywhere, at any time.

"We're on the road to nowhere, come join the ride..." bellowed Talking Heads. It was great being nowhere, connected to nothing. Mr Hot Crotch saw me dancing alone and decided to join me on the road to nowhere. "I'm an ordinary guy...Burning down the house..." came next. Lots of great Nihilistic songs.

"We're gonna get high, high, high, high, high, high..." It felt great to be free. Great to be part of the this whole F'ed party of people going nowhere. I threw off my shoes.

Another punch and I was twirling in a glow of light. Round and round then suddenly a shot of excruciating pain. I gasped in shock not knowing what had happened. I almost blacked out. The fat F in a caftan was mumbling something about being very sorry. I looked down and noticed a large hole in my foot where her high heel had landed when she threw herself gaily into the air. One thing I forgot about people going nowhere. They never look where they're going.

"Aaaaaach!" suddenly erupted from my mouth as I limped to the couch and put my crushed foot up. I had to spend the rest of the night on the couch with a cold glass of ice on my foot waiting for my friends to finish with their F's and take me home.

Funny how sordid and unappealing it all seemed from down there. Suddenly Talking Heads seemed dated and repetitive. The smell of fading perfume, alcohol and cigarettes was making me feel nauseous. Mr Tight Crotch and other Fs kept coming over and making inane conversation which annoyed me profusely. My foot was

in agony. The fat F kept shooting me competitive looks which made me wonder if she hadn't known exactly where she was going when she crushed my now-bleeding foot.

I spent the rest of my "big night out" worrying about whether you could get AIDS from high heeled shoes, and thinking about my new man and how cosy and satisfying it really is to stay home watching videos on a Saturday night with someone you love.

PAST PERFECT

We should never attempt to revisit the Past. We should leave intact its romantic illusions so they continue to match the lofty descriptions we award them: "..the best ever", "the most beautiful," "unbelievably wonderful."

We should keep Reality's sooty hands from rubbing up against our inflated delusions. But we can't. We are a greedy and interfering lot, us humans, always hankering to go back to a time that was better.

And so, over Summer, I revisited one of my most beautiful memory havens to recapture some of the magic lacking in a current brutal reality. I returned to Bali, seductive place of my youth, home of mysticism, exotic people and my own internal "noble savage."

As a teenager I had gone there in search of adventure. I didn't want the deep sultan, sarongs, cheap shoes or Bali affairs that most went for. I wanted to explore the mystical heart of the island and the mountains where supernatural occurrences were the norm. I was always, in those days, craving the magical and special experience that would lift me out of the mundane, always waiting for the spiritual "other world" to reaffirm that life was extraordinary.

"Seek and you shall find". There he was standing on the side-walk in Kuta two days after my arrival. He seemed to find me, this boy, whose late father had been one of the most powerful and notorious magic-men on the island. He had long raven hair, and an eerie presence. None of the Balinese I had met knew quite what he did. He was a mystery.

We became friends. He taught me what I wanted to know. At 5am each morning we would go to the beach to meditate and sing chants to the rising sun. He took me into the hills to meet the magic men. They had bottles filled with toads and eels, used to cast a spell which brought fire and ruin to the cursed recipient.

I went to cremations, tooth filing-ceremonies, and coal-walking ceremonies, saw trances and shadow puppets dancing their dance of good and evil on the walls of dimly lit jungle huts.

My friend said he could kill a person by pointing his hand at them. I believed him. He and his friends one night returned looking frightened. They had seen a demon with a transparent stomach on the side of the road. Despite the fact they tended to drink heavily and eat the hallucinogenic mushrooms that grew wild on the island, it never dawned on me their encounters could be anything other than mystical or divinely inspired.

But love is always a costly exercise - one way or another. The Balinese authorities were not terribly romantic and for each week I stayed beyond my four-week visa, I had to pay a horrific fee. My money endured for several months but finally the funds-of-love ran out. I told my friend I was going home. At this juncture he wept and begged me to marry him. Trembling and confused I mounted the plane intending to give the matter serious thought.

I never did. Safe back home I became consumed with the realities of financial journalism. I wrote many a pained letter to Bali but never got a response. I figured he was too hurt to write back.

So more than ten years later, I return to seek out the remnants of that mysterious experience and find out what became of my Balinese magic man.

I found Bali more soggy than I had remembered it. In fact the rain never abated for a moment. Gone was much of the wild jungle vegetation and sense of the primitive. Concrete stood in its place. Animal life consisted of busy colonies of Aussie and European tourists swarming the countryside.

I finally located a spokesman for the Past, a mutual acquaintance, and watched my illusions turn to waste.

Apparently my friend had married soon after I left. "To another Australian visa," the acquaintance laughed.

Seems my friend had been desperate to move to Australia, and had spent years before I had arrived playing up to the Aussie tourist girls. Another one came along within days of my going.

He and his wife had moved to Adelaide, to some working class suburb. He cut off all his hair and took a job working in a rubber factory.

And as if that weren't enough to insult my beautiful memory, his job was to random-check condoms for holes. Another poorly-paid Asian immigrant on the production line of life. The power of the past drained from my face. The past should never be tampered with.

I spent the next week in Bali shopping, buying cheap sarongs and talking to myself a lot about life, and illusion versus reality. "Ruth," I muttered, "at least you can never be hoodwinked again now that you are older and wiser. You can't be duped into believing in goblins and romance and fantasies and magic anymore."

And then I realised that that was the ultimate tragedy and sadness of growing up. That one could never recapture the magical excitement of the innocent and romantically deluded.

THE FLIP SIDE

My old girlfriend Lisa calls on the weekend to wish me Happy New Year. She has just had her second baby. She preaches the joys of child-bearing and married life over the phone - an annoyingly superior tone to her voice.

I am in the middle of teaching myself aromatherapy and reflexology, simultaneously, when she calls. I am massaging rose oil into my left foot while trying to balance the oily "How To" book on the top of my knees and cradle the phone in my right shoulder. I groan softly to make the massage sound fabulously exotic, indulgent and decadent - the sort of thing that only 'single' people can do because there is no one around to annoy them or make demands, or that need chasing with oily feet.

She wonders aloud whether she should read books to baby Karen at two months old : "to feed her mind". I wonder whether I have just massaged my kidney or liver or left eye according to the foot-diagram balancing on my knee being myopic at the best of times. Meanwhile the geranium oil, meant to "induce a feeling of euphoric

relaxation when it hits the olfactory system", has just hit the carpet which my roommate, who hates "incense-type things" will not be pleased about.

"I am so happy," Lisa coos, inviting me to envy her nurtured existence. Two beautiful babies, a wonderful husband who is sensitive, loves kids, has a superb income, all living together in their merry Edwardian home which they are forever renovating.

"I am so happy," I coo back, dropping little phrases like "travelling overseas again soon", "writing a film script", "met a gorgeous guy...", "multiple orgasms".

My life certainly does sound exciting as I hang up the phone and return to rubbing the frigging oily mess into my fat feet because I have nowhere to go that night, the phone having not rung all day.

Lisa isn't really happy either, I remind myself. I know because one winter night last year, after a few too many drinks, on one of the rare chances she has had to get away for the evening, she cried and confessed that she hated me. She hated my life, my career. The years I spent living in Manhattan and working as a journalist in strife-torn Israel.

She envied my ability to take risks. Hers was a measured, predictable, existence she said. Her husband was a bore. Her child drained every ounce of creative energy from her. She had moved from home to marriage without so much as a stop in between. She had never taken major risks in her life.

"You are Ruby Tuesday," she spluttered from her wine glass. A blast from the past. I grew up in the 60's. I used the song as my role model. I used to run around as a teenager in hot-pants and love beads singing: "Goodbye Ruby Tuesday, who can hang a name on you? And when you change with every new day, still I'm gonna miss you."

That free spirit was always going to be me. "Yesterday don't matter because it's gone..." Then one day that free spirit was me, as I pushed myself further and further out of my cosseted environment into uncharted terrain.

But Mick didn't tell us that Ruby Tuesday, drifting around the world trying to "catch her dreams before they run away", spent a lot of Saturday nights at home alone eating chocolate bickies to stimulate her deprived hypothalamus. Because being a free spirit meant long stretches without relationships or sex.

He didn't tell us that spending every dollar you earned running around the world in search of "something" that always seemed to have moved on just before you got there, induced a sour state of being called poverty.

He didn't talk about date rape and diseases like AIDS and Herpes. Or about what it feels like to share your soul with some new guy, or girlfriend, only to have all that "knowing" you have slowly built, evaporate, when the time comes to part.

Ah Mick, you old bastard. You fooled us all. You didn't give us the flip-side of the album. You didn't state the cost of insatiable curiosity, greed and an inability to commit. I said to Lisa that night from my drunken stupor: "Freedom is a selfish, empty, illusion." (hiccup!)

She said: "Maybe if we have another baby we will be happier. Marriage is so dull. We hardly ever have sex any more. I'm so jealous about New York."

I said: "In New York I lived with a divorced woman who saw an analyst three times a week and had 200 shampoo bottles lining the walls of her bathroom because

she believed that if she found the right shampoo her life would work out. She would find meaning.

"What is it you want that I have, Lisa? I'll trade it for a bit of continuity, emotional warmth, and meaning. For your ability to make emotional commitments, teach children about the world and care for them, to live in a home that always has someone in it."

Her eyes grew troubled as she contemplated the shampoo bottles, the overall chaos of my life and the strange souls who inhabited it. Finally she said: "Don is a good man. Our relationship will come good. It always does. We like being together. He can be very funny, you know. I do love him...."

I guess I must have looked pretty troubled at that point too. Because the dimensions of her life suddenly dawned on me. Mediocrity has never been a concept Ruby Tuesday has been happy with. "She just can't be chained to a life where nothing's gained and nothing's lost, at such a cost."

So off home we went that night in winter last year, both satisfied with our own lot. And we've lapsed back into strutting our lives at each other competitively down the phone line.

I know Lisa gets bored. I get lonely and insecure. I know she gets sick of people making endless demands of her. I get sick of massaging my own feet, and ego. Don's face drives her mad at times. I get loco at the endless stream of new faces through my life as I search, search, search, for that eternal something Mick Jagger promised me.

I know also, as I go back to massaging my feet and mopping the oil stains off the carpet before my room-mate gets home and screams at me, that I am no happier or sadder than Lisa. Contentment is not a reality, belonging to a specific way of life. It is a state of mind. The grass is not greener elsewhere. It is just different on the other side. Just different. That's all.

READER'S LETTERS

Dear Ruth,

I found that for the past eight years my blow-up doll was giving me silent pleasure, but it would be nice to be able to talk to a live person. As I do not drink, or go to the pub/club, I do not meet people of the female gender. I am 53 years of age, six feet tall. Is there a real woman out there for me? If there is, please write. A, Sth Sydney, NSW (details provided)

Dear Ruth,

To A, of South Sydney. Surely letting down your blow-up doll after 8 years is just a bad case of the seven-year itch? Don, Castlereagh, NSW

Dear Ruth,

The reason I blame for my lack of success on the dating scene is because of men's one liners. As soon as a man opens his mouth I usually feel compelled to vomit. It's either corny ("What's a nice girl like you...") pathetic or crude ("Let's go out for a feed and then to my place for a root"). These things have really been said to me. Men are better off saying nothing at all. Desperate, Bondi, NSW

Dear Ruth,

My son recently asked me what I thought about sex before marriage. I told him, "Go for it son, there is precious little after marriage". Fred, Mt Tamborine, QLD

Dear Ruth,

I'd like to mention that why men don't bother to talk to women of beauty is that such women think their shit doesn't stink. Myself and my mates find it much easier to talk to a plainer Jane because she is friendly, open and relaxed with us. With the way equality is today we'll stick with plain Jane until the beauty comes over and asks us out. D. A, Perth, W.A.

Dear Ruth,

So there is a "chronic shortage of straight, available male talent". If this is seriously the case, then where are the hordes of straight, available female talent that is supposed to exist? I have become increasingly convinced that they are either gay, married, already have kids, men-hating feminazis or pining for that 20-stone gorilla that treats her like dirt. Waiting.

Ruth Ostrow,

I was well over 30 before I had my first sexual experience. I had given up all hope of ever meeting anybody, so I finally telephoned a prostitute to visit me in my home. Despite all I had heard, the woman turned out to be a warm, happy and caring person whom I have asked to return once a month. Why do the police, the press and the public give these women such a bad image? To many lonely men like me, they are the only female company we will have. K.B, Brisbane, QLD.