

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dot Homme

Jane Moore

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About the Author

Jane Moore is a columnist for the *Sun* and writes regular articles for the *Sunday Times*. She has presented the daily breakfast show on LBC and regularly co-presented the acclaimed TV show, *Loose Women*, ITV's *This Morning* and BBC1's *Crimewatch Daily*. She lives in London.

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For Ellie, Lauren and Grace

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'My computer dating service came up with a perfect gentleman. Still, I've got another three goes.'

- Sally Poplin

Prologue

I'm 35, tall, dark, and lonesome after the demise of a long-term relationship. WLTM someone who fancies taking it softly softly, having a bit of fun, and seeing where life takes us.

OK, so it's not the wittiest, most innovative dating ad in the world, but if truth be known he could have written 'rhubarb rhubarb' and I'd have fixed a meeting on the basis of his photograph alone. Shallow, I know, but hey, what's a girl to do when her social calendar has tumbleweed blowing across it?

His picture shows him bare-chested, standing on what looks like a Spanish beach, judging by the 'All the Sangria you can drink for 20 Euros' sign on a bar in the background.

He's slim, with very dark brown hair and the kind of chiselled jaw that usually graces the pages of *GQ* magazine. He's not smiling, but I can imagine he has pearly white, perfectly even teeth. Though, knowing my luck, they'll probably look like Stonehenge in a storm.

It's 1 p.m. and we've arranged to meet outside the door to the Hippodrome nightclub in Leicester Square, no doubt awash with vomit and urine from last night's revelry.

This time, I'm taking no chances on being the first to arrive and finding myself faced with some Stig of the Dump

lookalike. Instead, I position myself in a doorway across the road, easily hidden by the endless stream of office workers marching purposefully from one place to another, or tourists wandering aimlessly, baffled by the grubby, litter-strewn square in front of them that looks nothing like the pristine image in their city guide. As usual, there's one appallingly bad busker murdering 'Back in the USSR' (we all wish he was) and several arty-farty, theatrical types pretending to be statues.

There's only one man currently occupying the doorway of the Hippodrome, and as he's lying down on a dirty blanket and clutching a can of Special Brew, I can only pray he's always there and isn't my mystery date.

A woman walks past him and ignores his extended hand. 'Slag!' he shouts, dribbles of lager foaming at the corners of his mouth. Oh, dear. Maybe this wasn't such a wise choice of location after all.

A few more minutes pass and several more insults are bellowed. I wonder whether my date has already clocked the unsavoury scene and decided to keep walking. Then, good news, he appears. Better news, he's every bit as gorgeous as his photograph.

He stands a few feet to one side of the doorway's inebriated occupant who, thankfully, seems to have drifted off into a drink-induced state of unconsciousness.

Smoothing down my coat and the back of my hair, I resist the urge to apply yet another layer of lip gloss for fear of sticking to him if there's a small kiss by way of greeting. Taking a deep breath, I start walking through the throng of people, my heart in my throat. I haven't felt this nervous before, and I wonder whether it's because he's so stunning. Good looks do funny things to the beholder, and to those blessed with them it can be the barrier to developing a really attractive personality. After all, if everyone's going to approach you anyway and laugh

raucously at everything you say, why bother brushing up on witty or interesting anecdotes?

Now I'm just a couple of feet away from him, but he's facing the other way. Tapping him on the shoulder, I adopt what I hope to be a smouldering gaze and sexy half-smile, and wait for him to turn round. When he does, he has the most piercingly blue eyes I've ever seen, and my stomach does a somersault.

'Jack?' I ask, having learned his name when he emailed me to arrange the time and place.

He takes a small step back and, almost imperceptibly, looks me up and down. His face remains impassive. 'Jack? No, sorry, you must have made a mistake.'

I'm momentarily baffled. The man standing in front of me is an exact replica of the man in the photograph, right down to the little kiss curl of fringe above his right eye. Why on *earth* is he pretending otherwise?

'So, you're definitely not called Jack?' My eyes dart suspiciously from his face to the ground and back again.

'Nope, sorry.' He looks faintly defiant, ramming his hands into his jeans pockets and moving shiftily from foot to foot.

Slowly, realisation dawns on me. This *is* him, but having seen me in the flesh he's clearly deeply disappointed and doesn't want to take it any further. I can feel my nerve ends bristling with the indignity of it.

'You must think I came down the Clyde on a banana boat,' I scoff, staring defiantly at him.

'Sorry?' He's trying to look perplexed by the fact that this strange madwoman is accosting him in the street, but his cheeks have flushed bright red and he's blinking rapidly. You don't have to be Desmond Morris to know he's guilty as charged.

'You *are* Jack,' I persist. 'Either that, or your identical twin is advertising on the Internet and, by a sheer trillion-to-one coincidence, he has failed to turn up and you're here

to meet someone else purely by chance.' I'm not sure if what I've said has even made sense, but I stand my ground in front of him, glaring.

He blinks uneasily for a few seconds, clearly mulling over what to do or say next. 'Well, you look absolutely nothing like *your* photo,' he says indignantly. 'I was expecting someone much prettier and slimmer.'

My mouth is now wedged open with shock at the injustice of what he's just said. OK, so I'm not Kate Moss, but I'm not exactly Stirling Moss either. And *slimmer*? What does he want, a pipe cleaner?

'So what are you saying?' Great. As if his insult wasn't bad enough the first time round, I now seem to be asking him to repeat it.

He sighs. 'I'm saying that what I saw is not what I've got standing in front of me. Your photograph is deceptive.'

'No, it isn't. My friends say it looks just like me.'

'They're being kind,' he says dismissively, looking at his watch. 'Look, no offence, but I just don't fancy you. So what's the point of going for a coffee, or whatever, if I already know that?'

Funny how you can go off someone, isn't it? Now he's more P&O Cruise than Tom Cruise, but I still can't leave without taking him to task.

'I see. So, such is the depth of your personality, you judge people purely on looks alone?' I demand, hypocritically pushing aside the memory of the 'phwoar' I'd thought when I first clapped eyes on his photo.

He shrugs. 'Not just looks, no. More chemistry really. A spark.'

He was making perfect sense, of course, but the lingering sting of rejection wouldn't let me admit it. *I* was allowed to say things like that, but he was supposed to be blown away by the mere sight of me. 'A spark can always come later,' I retort.

'No.' He shakes his head. 'The fire comes later. The spark that makes the fire has to be there from the outset and it's just not there for me ... sorry,' he adds as an afterthought.

'Yes, yes, so you keep saying.' I frown, momentarily distracted by the sound of Mr Special Brew stirring to my right.

'Look ...' Jack's expression and tone have softened. 'It's nothing personal, honest. I'm just very focussed on what I want, and you're not it. But I'm happy to go for a quick coffee, if you like, just to show there are no hard feelings.'

Oh, God, he's pitying me now, offering me a consolation prize. That's worse than being told, in so many words, that I'm an unattractive heffalump not fit to sully his eyeline.

I can feel my irritation ebbing into depression now. I have to get away.

'No point,' I say wearily. 'I think I've wasted enough time here already. I'd better get back to work.'

'OK, nice to meet you.' He flashes me a movie-star smile. 'And sorry again.'

'Not as sorry as I am.' The drunk behind me has now leaned forward and is tapping my ankle asking for money. 'But thanks anyway, it's been really ... er ... forgettable.'

I turn away from him and fumble in my coat pocket. Finding a pound coin, I stoop down and place it in the grubby, open palm of the dosser.

His bloodshot eyes look down and focus on it, his mouth clearly curling into a sneer under the mass of unkempt beard.

'Tight bitch!' he bellows at my retreating back.

Thank you, God. What a hum-dinging, bells-ringing, bunting-waving arsewipe of a day.

You may be wondering why I came here at all ... why I put myself through this experience when I clearly don't have the inclination, or indeed the stomach, for it.

But the fact is, it wasn't my idea. Let me explain ...

1

Goodbye thirty-three. Hello thirty-four. I can say this quite calmly, so clearly the mid-life madness isn't going to strike me down just yet. Maybe next year.

After all, it was thirty-five that did for Julia, my trusty drinking partner from college days. She literally went to bed one night, full of anticipation of our forthcoming 18-30 holiday (OK, so we lied on the application form, but doesn't everyone?), then woke up the next morning sobbing that she was on life's giant shelf and was sick of just being taken down and dusted occasionally.

'I want some permanency in my life,' she wailed, before cancelling our holiday and marrying the first man who crossed her path. Literally. I went to her wedding to the pizza delivery man, but haven't seen her since.

So here I am, on my way to my 'surprise' birthday party, organised by my dear friend and fellow TV producer Tabitha. Except that I know all about it, because my sister Livvy rang to warn me. She knows that I loathe and detest surprises and would be highly likely to walk straight back out again if one is sprung on me.

Instead, I shall arrive at the pub where I'm supposed to be meeting Tab for 'a quiet drink', then put on an Oscar-winning performance of shock and delight at seeing the others there too.

As I walk in the door, I crane my neck above the crowds to seek her out. She leaps to her feet as soon as she sees

me.

'Hi! Happy birthday!' She envelops me in a hug then stands back and gives me the once over. 'You look great. Come on, I've booked a quiet table for the two of us through here.'

Leading me by the hand, she guides me through to a small, oblong-shaped room with a circular table plonked in the middle of it, rather tellingly laid out for several people and decorated with lots of birthday kitsch from the pound shop. At one end of the room there's a dark plum velvet curtain from which a jewelled mule is protruding quite obviously.

'Ta da!' Mule-owner Maddy emerges from behind the curtain, tugging it back to reveal my other 'mystery' guests, all grinning like jackanapes and chorusing 'Surprise!'

'Oh my gosh!' Pulling my best Macaulay Culkin expression, I shriek loudly, then start running up and down on the spot for good measure. Seeing Livvy glaring at my pitiful over-acting, I stop immediately. 'Wow, you guys really fooled me! I had absolutely *no* idea.'

There follows an excruciating few seconds where they all burst into a half-hearted chorus of 'Happy Birthday', a cacophony of flat notes, high-pitched wailing, and even a moment's hesitation when they clearly forget who they're singing it for.

'Thanks.' I beam insincerely. 'Shall we sit down?'

Now thankfully the attention has shifted from me and everyone is jostling for position and opening their napkins, I should take the opportunity to introduce you to a few of the usual suspects.

First of all there's Maddy, my social salvation. That's her sitting directly opposite me, fussing over who wants still and who wants sparkling. She's single too and, consequently, we see an inordinate amount of each other in our quest to find the 'perfect' man we can then try to

change beyond recognition. In the meantime, Maddy happily indulges in lots of meaningless flings, not least because she's stunning and slim and a lot more successful at attracting men than I am. She thinks it's every man for herself and, as a dancer, her ability to lift her leg on to their shoulders in wine bars helps enormously. Tonight, as usual, she's wearing what I always describe as one of her 'nuclear' outfits, with fifty per cent fallout. But as she once told me, she never shows her underwear unintentionally.

At the table, she's flanked either side by Richard and Lars, or Dick and Arse as I affectionately call them. Richard and I met when we were both TV researchers on *Good Morning, Britain*. He worked in the showbiz department, whilst I was 'human interest.' You know, those 'I had one black twin and one white twin' kind of stories which are really just car crash viewing, but we have to pretend we're doing a public service by highlighting this problem and run a phone line: 'If you've had twins that are different colours and would like help, then call this number ...' Blah blah blah.

Richard has stayed in light entertainment, though he's risen to the lofty heights of a senior producer on the Saturday night game show *Till Divorce Do Us Part* - catchphrase 'The bounty after the mutiny' - where warring couples win the glittering prize of an all-expenses paid decree absolute.

His Dutch boyfriend Lars, a striking six-foot-three black man, is one of the dancers who high-kicks their way across the studio floor when the contestants win the chance to live happily ever apart. I met Maddy through him.

Oh, hang on. Something's happening. My sister Livvy is banging on the table, causing her husband Michael to flinch.

'Here's to Jess. Happy thirty-fourth birthday. Cheers!' She raises her champagne glass and takes a swig, and everyone follows suit.

‘Cheers,’ I parrot, knocking back a mouthful myself. ‘This really is terribly nice of you all.’

Livvy is my elder by two years and something of a heroine of mine. Other siblings so close in age may get irritable with each other but she has never been a thorn in my side. For as long as I can remember, far from being a tormentor, she has always been supportive and caring. Most memorably, when I had nightmares as a child, she would sit and stroke my hair until I drifted back to sleep.

When she left home to go to Bristol University, I was distraught for at least a week, sobbing into my pillow and refusing to be consoled by our mother. Then I met a boy in sixth form and became temporarily obsessed by him instead.

The tinny sound of cutlery banging against glass drags me out of my nostalgic thoughts.

‘Shall we do presents?’ It’s Kara, the friend I have known the longest but like the least. We’ve all got one, haven’t we? Inexplicably, we stay in touch with them, drawn like moths to a flame, even though they drive us to distraction most of the time. Men are pragmatically ruthless in such situations, unashamedly severing ties with anyone they consider surplus to requirements. But we women hang on in there, making excuses for the excesses of a ghastly friend, loyal to the bitter, drawn out end, ever hopeful that one day they’ll justify our patience.

But Kara, as you’ll learn, is *particularly* dreadful. Sooner or later, you’ll wonder why I put up with her, so I may as well address the issue now.

You see, she once saved my life. Not in a grabbed-my-cardie-just-as-I-was-about-to-step-out-in-front-of-a-nearby-car kind of way. No, it was much more than that. She *really* saved my life, in the kind of dramatic way they make afternoon movies about.

It was the summer of 1988 and we were both among a crowd of friends going for a swim in the local river.

Stupidly, I went in alone after several gin and tonics, getting into difficulty when my foot caught in something. Flailing around and screaming for help, I suddenly seemed miles from the bank. Worse, the others – pissed and not very quick on the uptake – seemed to think I was mucking around. They were all laughing raucously and waving back.

Except Kara. She understood the gravity of the situation immediately and, without a thought for her own safety, dived in fully clothed. Swimming across to me, she ducked under the murky water and freed my foot from what seemed to be an old, abandoned boat mooring. Exhausted, I could barely tread water, so she flipped me over and tugged me back to safety just like in lifesaving classes. Minus the pyjamas of course.

We'd always been on the periphery of each other's lives since meeting at sixth form college the year before, but from that moment on we formed a deep bond. To my mind, she had totally and utterly saved my life, and there was never any way I could repay her for that.

I was always aware that Kara had a slightly prickly, odd personality, but convinced myself that it was just her way and, underneath it all, she had a heart of gold. But my parents and Livvy have always disliked her and despaired of her influence over me.

I can't quite put my finger on when it *really* started to go wrong, but over the years her loyalty became questionable and her face increasingly sour. These days there's definitely an undercurrent of jealousy on her part, and it's as if she only hangs around to delight and luxuriate in the bad things that happen to me. Any happy event in my life seems a tangible disappointment to her.

I suppose the best way to sum her up is that she's always there when she needs you. But I put up with it because ... well, how could I *not* after what she did for me.

Tonight, she has dragged along her boyfriend, Dan. He's an amiable enough chap who wombles through life doing

no one any harm, but for some reason he's been ensnared by Mrs Danvers. Kara has already told me he will propose by Christmas, but I'm not sure she's told *him* that yet.

Everyone places their presents in a huge pile in front of me and, rather self-consciously, I start to unwrap them with oohs, aahs and you-shouldn't-haves in all the right places. A beautiful fawn-coloured pashmina from Livvy, a Walkman from Richard and Lars, a popcorn maker from Tab and Will, and a suede-covered photo album from Maddy, with pictures of our various excesses glued inside ... finally, Kara hands me an envelope.

'This is from me.' She gives me a thin excuse for a smile.

Oh, puh-lease, a bloody gift voucher or book token. How original, I think mutinously. But when I open the envelope, there's a folded piece of A4 inside and my brow furrows with curiosity. All eyes are on me as I pull it out and, worryingly, I notice that my sister looks particularly apprehensive.

The first thing I clap eyes on is a photocopy of a rather indistinct head and shoulders photo of me, grinning vacantly like a halfwit. I remember it was taken at my birthday party last year, shortly before I vomited into the wine bar's ice bucket after drinking my own weight in Sangria. Classy, huh?

To one side, there's a printed paragraph and I start to read it out loud.

'I am a 34-year-old fun-loving woman interested in meeting someone similar. My friend is baffled that I'm single, so perhaps you're the one to clear up the mystery' ... My voice tails off, my blood freezing in my veins as it dawns on me what this is.

'Please tell me you haven't already placed this?' I look directly at Kara who is positively glowing with relish at my discomfort.

'Of course I have!' She smirks. 'It's your birthday present!'

I scan the others for signs that this is a joke, but absolutely no one is looking me in the eye except her.

'Get it stopped.' I throw the piece of paper across the table and point at her mobile. 'Call them *right* now and pull it.'

'Can't. It's already on the Internet.' She's trying to look apologetic, but I can tell she's extremely pleased with herself.

Taking a deep breath, I hold it for a few seconds. Knowing Livvy inside out, I glance at her quickly and realise that this whole ghastly business isn't a wind-up. It's one hundred per cent genuine.

'Did you know about this?' I look at her beseechingly.

'Yes.' She nods slowly, wincing with discomfort. 'But only when I got here this evening, so there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. None of us knew beforehand.' She looks round the table for support and the others all nod hastily in agreement.

The Exorcist's Linda Blair has nothing on the head swivel I use to turn back to Kara.

'How fucking dare you!' I glare at her and it takes all my willpower not to lunge for her scrawny throat. 'You had no right to do this, it's *totally* intrusive.'

Even she looks taken aback by my sudden outburst, and pouts. 'It's only a bit of fun.'

Richard turns down the corners of his mouth and stares at the table.

'It might be a bit of fun to you, but that's *my* name on there.' I jab my finger at it. 'Not yours. I can't *believe* you think I'd find that funny ... I'm going to put a stop to it first thing in the morning.'

Having swallowed my meal along with a large, indigestible helping of righteous indignation, I knock back yet another glass of house white and close my eyes for a second. When

I open them, Richard has sidled into the now empty chair beside me.

'Hi.' He smiles sheepishly.

'Low,' I reply, with my best disconsolate expression. 'I'm at rock bottom and starting to dig.'

'Darling, just relax,' he drawls.

'Relax?' I scoff. 'It's only the tension that's holding me together.'

The pair of us stare across the table for a few silent seconds, watching Livvy and her husband Michael totally engrossed in their own conversation, his hand caressing the back of her neck.

'On the one hand,' I say, nodding in their direction, 'they give me faith. On the other, I despair of ever meeting anyone I could love that much.'

'Of course you will, darling,' says Richard in the syrupy, patronising tone my mother always used to assure me that, provided I did my best, I would pass all my exams. I took her advice but flunked most of them anyway. 'But, of course, you won't meet him if you refuse to put yourself out there.'

I raise my eyes heavenward. '*Dick*,' I say pointedly, a tactic I always use when he's doing or saying something ludicrous, 'I'm hardly the hermit woman of Balham. I do go out, you know.'

'Yes, but only with me or Tabitha, and we're hardly ideal for attracting heterosexual men. I mean, bless her, Tab easily hits the danger zone on the mooseometer.'

I feel terrible laughing, but do anyway. 'Don't be rotten.'

'You need a more direct approach,' he continues. 'And, by the way, you live in Tooting.'

I scowl for a moment, puzzled by his remark. Not the Tooting bit, he's always ticking me off for pretending to live somewhere slightly posher than I do. No, I'm thrown by the direct approach bit. Then it clicks.

'No. Absolutely not!' I slam my hand so hard down on the table that a narrow vase containing a single yellow rose topples over and spills its water. 'I flatly refuse to date some anorak-wearing cyber-man from the Internet.'

Richard pulls a pooh-poohing face. 'Why not? Everyone's doing it these days. It's the new sexual revolution darling, but instead of Woodstock and flower power orgies, it's taking place through your fingertips.' He mimics tapping a keyboard.

'Not through *mine*,' I retaliate. 'I prefer the old-fashioned method of meeting a man.'

He places a hand over his mouth and feigns a yawn. 'What, endless nights spent propping up a bar in the hope that one of the surrounding men might be single? If they've registered on the Internet, you *know* they're looking for a relationship so it cuts out all the crap. It's the fast track to fun, fun, fun.'

I wrinkle my nose. 'It's just not *me*.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know.' He waves his hand dismissively. 'You're unique ... just like everyone else.'

His remark may have punctured my ego somewhat, but inside I am reluctantly admitting that he has a point. My persistently single state indicates that maybe I have been going about dating in the wrong way, that maybe it *is* time for change.

Possibly suspecting a slight thaw in my chill, he warms to the theme. 'There are literally thousands and thousands of them on line, just waiting to be plucked. Darling, even *you* stand a chance with those odds.'

'Cheers.' I smile sarcastically. 'I'm still not doing it.'

Richard pours me more wine, presumably in the hope it will help weaken my resolve. 'Take a look, at least. That won't do any harm. You can log on and scroll through the potential dates. Just think - your very own hunk hypermarket, and they won't even know you're there.'

'Hmmm. The best I can offer is that I'll think about it.' Put like that, I don't know what else to say.

Maddy hoves into view, her eyes crossed with frustration. 'God, how do you put up with *her*.'

'Ah, Kara.' I smile, following her glance. 'Yes, she's quite a girl isn't she? Who's she been spitting bile about now?'

Maddy casts a furtive glance over her shoulder. 'I was talking about dancing, and she said, "Bit old for that, aren't you?" Fucking cheek! She barely knows me.'

'Oh, that never stops her. Everyone is entitled to her opinion.' I steal a crafty puff of Richard's cigarette while my censorious sister is looking the other way. 'The only thing that cheats Kara out of the last word is an echo.'

'And she's got such an innocent, harmless look about her,' continues Maddy. 'As if butter wouldn't melt.'

'Yes, the face of a saint,' agrees Richard. 'Trouble is, it's a bloody Saint Bernard. I just feel sorry for that poor sod of a boyfriend. Talk about under the thumb!'

'Nah. Dan's easygoing but he's no pushover,' I say. 'I'm sure he stands up to her, he's just too polite to do it in public.'

'Anyway ...' Maddy looks at Richard but jerks her head towards me. 'Have you persuaded her yet?'

'Persuaded me to do what?' Then it sinks in and I let out a low groan. 'Oh, God, you're not on about that wretched Internet thing again?'

'Go *on*, it'll be a laugh if nothing else,' says Maddy. 'What have you got to lose?'

'My dignity?' I retort. Then a thought strikes me. 'I tell you what - I'll do it if you do.'

Of course, as a woman who makes Mae West look positively virginal, Maddy is quite simply the worst person I could have thrown out this challenge to.

She shrugs. 'Absolutely fine by me. But I'm not the one looking for a serious relationship. I'm happy with the occasional fling with whoever life throws at me.'

'She's *so* discerning.' Richard smiles sarcastically. 'Anyway, she says she'll do it too, so that's it now, you *have* to go ahead with it.'

My heart doesn't just sink, it's got concrete boots on. 'OK, three dates, no more,' I say resignedly. 'But if none of them turn out to be Mr Right, then it's back to the old method of trawling wine bars and late-night bus-stops.'

'Fantastic!' Richard slaps his thigh D'Artagnan-style. 'All for fun, and fun for all!'

2

Oh, God. I have just logged on to my computer, and I have thirty-seven emails from total and utter strangers. The jaw-dropping, knuckle-scraping, head-hanging shame of it.

But also, deep down, I have to admit to feeling a slight thrill too. I don't know them, they don't know me, and, best of all, they have absolutely no way of making contact other than through email. Unless, of course, I reply and grant them the honour of knowing my phone number.

Yet I can call up their dating ad, along with thousands of others, and pore over their photographs and personal details. Even more astonishingly, I can read the answers to the kind of gallingly intrusive questions it would usually take at *least* two or three traditional dates even to dare broach. Such as 'How much do you earn?' and 'Do you want to have children?'

There's something rather addictive about cutting through the crap so comprehensively and finding out if you're singing from the same song sheet before the band even strikes the first chord. That's, of course, if they're actually telling the truth. Like those magazine surveys where everyone's supposedly at it eight times a day, one suspects some of the descriptions on the website have been 'sexed up'.

It's 6.30 a.m. and I have deliberately come into the office early, leaving myself free to browse through the sex supermarket without fear of being ridiculed by any nosy

work colleagues. I decide to leave the thirty-seven replies to my ad until later, and take a cyber stroll through the general site first.

A form appears asking my requirements, as if I were simply buying a car. I can tap in my preferences as to hair colour, height, and religion, and up pops a list of all the men who fit my specifications. How very Third Reich.

I decide to hedge my bets and keep it vague, asking for someone between the ages of thirty and forty-five who lives within twenty-five miles of London. The machine makes a faint grinding noise as it searches.

'Shit!' I exclaim out loud as it tells me I have 3,456 matches. Each has a passport-sized photograph they have provided, alongside their brief description of themselves. It instructs you to click on their picture to get further information.

'Bob764' catches my eye and I double-click right on the bridge of his nose. The photograph enlarges and, although slightly blurred, I can see he has rather striking blue eyes and an attractive grin.

I lean forward slightly, scrutinising him. Could he be the one? Could I really, in all seriousness, meet the man I might spend the rest of my life with by way of a computer? And even if I did, what would we say when someone asked how we met? I'd rather say our eyes met over the condom counter of Boots than 'fess up to the truth.

Another, 'Crespo', is very handsome but rather off-puttingly suggests he's a man who could fulfil a girl's greatest fantasy. I toy with the idea of asking him to fix my roof for nothing.

'Hmmm, he's tasty.'

I jump out of my skin, rapidly hit the 'close' button and swivel round in my chair. 'Oh, thank fuck, it's you!' I press the palm of my hand against my chest, waiting for my racing pulse to subside. 'What on earth are you doing in so early? Is the end of the world nigh?'

'I was going to ask you the same,' says Tabitha. 'But now I know why. I have to call Australia to research that strand on Lizard Island, and I'm buggered if I'm using my home phone to do it.'

She plonks her handbag on the desk next to me and sits down. She nods towards my computer. 'I hope you're going to put him on your list of potential dates. He looks just your type.'

'What do you mean, *my type*?' I scowl, mortally wounded by the thought that I might be predictable in some way.

'Oh, you know. The romantic, penniless poet type. The one who would be the next Dylan Thomas ... if only someone would recognise his potential.'

She's absolutely spot on, of course, and my laughable relationship history backs this up. There have been a succession of short-lived poetic ne'er-do-wells in my life, and one giant, musical one to whom I gave the best years of my thighs.

After five years of my giving him endless emotional and financial support whilst he tried, unsuccessfully I might add, to get a recording deal, he left me just over a year ago for a twenty-something Trustafarian with a small brain and a large fortune.

Nathan, he was called, or Satan as Richard refers to him. Even now, I can only just bring myself to say his name. But Tab's right. Unfortunately, being kicked in the teeth by Mr Futon Potato hasn't dulled my appetite for airy-fairy 'creative' types.

'Sod Australia. I'll get them out of bed later,' says Tab, pulling her chair closer to my screen. 'Let's have a look at some more.'

We spend the next half an hour engrossed in what unfolds before us on the flickering screen, oohing and aahing in equal measure at some of the seemingly high-calibre men offering themselves up, laughing like drains at the low-calibre barrel-scrappers. All human life is here, from

seventeen-year-old spotty youths right up to a couple of octogenarians.

'Look at this one!' I shriek, double-clicking on 'Alf, 74'. His ad reads: 'I'm 5'5" but used to be 5'7". I can remember Mondays to Thursdays, so if you can remember Fridays to Sundays, then let's put our heads together for some action.'

'Well, at least he's got a sense of humour,' laughs Tab. 'I might even give him a go myself.'

I pull a sucking-a-lemon face. 'What does 'action' mean? Do you think he's referring to sex? Look at him, poor love, he'd have to bring along an eighteen year old and a set of jump leads.'

A door creaks open in the distance and footsteps come towards us. Seeing it's Janice, our executive producer, I hastily click the 'sign out' option on the screen.

'Bloody hell, are you two on a sponsored work-in for charity?' Sarcasm is just one of the services she offers. She looks at the clock. 'I don't normally see either of you for at least another hour.'

'I've been making calls to Oz on the Lizard Island strand,' lies Tab with consummate ease. 'Jess stayed at mine last night, so came in early with me.'

I simply smile in mute agreement, not trusting myself to say anything. Janice has always intimidated me.

'Good.' She smiles thinly, eyes narrowed in suspicion. 'Feel free to come in early to the office any time you like.'

'This isn't an office. It's hell with fluorescent lighting,' mutters Tab to her retreating back.

Once Janice has disappeared into her walnut-clad corner lair, I wait a few moments then retrieve the notebook I'd hastily stuffed into the top drawer of my desk as she loomed.

'That's a good morning's work there.' Tab smiles, tapping the cover with a plum-coloured talon. 'I have a strong feeling the future Mr Monroe may be among them.'

It's 6 p.m. and I'm sprinting, well, more lolloping really, towards the station, my overstuffed handbag on one arm, an overnight bag on the other.

It's Livvy and Michael's seventh wedding anniversary today and he's booked the honeymoon suite at the Dorchester. Rather than their forking out for a babysitter overnight and having all the worry of the children possibly waking up and being upset by the presence of a stranger, I said I'd happily stay over.

It's absolutely no bother for me; in fact, I really relish my own little slice of what I see as an idyllic family life from time to time. I can fantasise that one day, I too will be living in similar domestic bliss with a man I adore and our two beautiful children.

My sister Livvy has the perfect life, the one I would give my right arm for but don't even know how to begin to achieve. She and Michael met in Bristol where he was studying medicine and she was doing a three-year physiotherapy course. She says that as soon as she clapped eyes on him in her local pub, she knew he was 'the one'.

Our mother always told us we'd know when HE came along. She'd spin us magical tales about when she first saw Dad, and how it felt as if she'd been struck by a thunderbolt. She often chose to omit the less flowery fact that, at the time, he'd been selling her a two-seater sofa in orange Dralon.

As an adult, I now realise the circumstances and their alleged exchange of dialogue would change a little with each telling, as she reinvented history in her starry-eyed pursuit of romance. But as children, Livvy and I had unquestioningly absorbed every word and carried the ideal through to adulthood; a gigantic expectation we would either fulfil or fail dismally to realise.

Livvy had hit the jackpot with Michael, but my gigantic expectation had become a millstone round my neck, weighing me down with the assumption that, unless I feel