

DEFINITIONS

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CHLOË RAYBAN



Terminal
Chic

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e-mail

RED FOX DEFINITIONS

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Terminal Chic



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Virtual Sexual Reality

Love. in Cyberia

I

This isn't how it's meant to be. Love. It should be like that guy in the Armani ad gazing into my eyes longingly, while our lips oh-so-almost meet. Or that bloke in the Highland Spring ad getting ever so hot and passionate with me in the local launderette. It shouldn't be just me, all alone, lurking by Daddy's Apple Mac like some saddo, praying for an e-mail.

An e-mail! A measly little message in a crummy typeface with all that grotty bilge they print before it. It's hardly hearts and roses, is it? It's hardly the kinda stuff you're going to tie up in a ribbon and keep in your bottom drawer for your kids to find and be deeply moved by when you're dead. I must be losing it.

Franz (Francesca), my bestest friend, is philosophical about the whole thing: 'I know you, Justine, I reckon you should've made yourself more available,' was her attempt at a diagnosis. Typical. Franz is Year Twelve's sexual pioneer — she's charitably testing out the ground on the male side of the planet and seeing if it's safe for the rest of us to move in. She's always telling me I'm way too understated.

Max (Maxine) takes a different line: 'Let's face it, Justine, you were being way too obvious. If males sense the merest

whiff of female desperation, they make for the hills.' Maybe she's right. Maybe I should've waited for him to make the first move . . . and the second . . . and the third. Oh god, I know she's right.

Henry (Henrietta) is the scientific one among us. Now you can rely on Henry to give a totally objective and balanced view. Henry's got this theory that it's just one big gene pool out there. The ultimate aim of all females is to claim the best male in the pond – the one with the fittest body, the maximum brain cells and the coolest taste in trainers. She delivered the following in a flat monotone that really got to me: 'It's obvious, isn't it? According to your account, he's older, he's smarter, he's got looks to die for and the coolest friends. He even plays in a band. You gotta face facts, he's way out of your league, Justine.'

You know, sometimes I wonder if I even want to be friends with Henry.

The only one who truly understood the situation was Chuck. He said: 'Those surfers think they own the universe. Forget him, Justine.'

I slumped down on his bed.

'Maybe he's just playing hard to get,' I suggested.

'Playing hard to get? Let's face it, Justine, he *is* hard to get. That guy comes from the future. And not just a little way ahead. Another *millennium*. Think about it.'

Had I been thinking of anything else? (No, literally. I know you're not going to believe this, nobody does. But Los, this dream of a guy I met last year, comes from the Fourth Millennium. I never could work out how many years ahead that makes him, but it's yonks. Anyway, despite all that, we really hit it off. Fancied each other like mad. At least I think we did. In fact I know I did.)

'That doesn't stop me being in love with him,' I countered.

'In love. Love! You must really want to make your life a misery. If that guy's in love with anyone, it's himself.'

'But he really liked me. I know he did. He actually made up a song for me. It must have taken him hours. Why else would a guy want to do that?'

Chuck turned back to his monitor, where he'd spent the past day doing an Internet search for my long overdue General Science project. 'It has been known,' he muttered. 'I think it's called "the Justine effect". Makes males act in a totally inexplicable way.'

I felt considerably up-cheered by that.

Chuck really understands me. I've known him since I was born. Before, actually, if you count womb-to-womb contact. You see, Chuck's mother and my mother met each other in antenatal classes at Queen Charlotte's Hospital. They spent a considerable number of our formative hours laid out like beached whales side by side doing breathing exercises. I'd never have known Chuck otherwise. I mean, we're like on totally opposite sides of the social spectrum. He goes to a comprehensive and his friends wear a different set of labels. But being born on the same day and everything, it's like we're kind of un-related twins. And think of all that star stuff. Same day, same place? Short of being born in the same bed we could hardly be closer, could we? Which makes me really doubt horoscopes. I mean, we're *so* different. You can practically guarantee we'll have opposite opinions on simply everything.

'Anyway,' he continued. 'He's just a pathetic loser, if you want my opinion.'

I ignored this comment as predictable male rivalry. 'It must be love. It really hurts. I get a great big lump in my throat whenever I think about him. It's ghastly. I haven't felt this bad since our cat ran away. If only we weren't so far apart.'

'Yeah well, right now you've got to accept the fact that he's

currently “out of the scene”.’ Chuck said this with a most unsympathetic snort of satisfaction. Then he added with a sigh, ‘But knowing you, that probably adds to the attraction.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, he’s unobtainable, isn’t he? Means he can’t put a big toe wrong. You’ve made up this great big idealised picture of him, in which he’s absolutely smegging perfect. And since he’s not around, he’s not likely to do anything to disprove it.’

‘But Los is perfect.’

‘Justine. He’s even got a crap name.’

‘Los Angeles,’ I sighed. ‘I think it’s so-oo cool. Suits him . . .’

‘You’re not going to blub again, are you?’

‘Have you got a hanky?’

Chuck got up and slammed a box of Man-size down in front of me. ‘Honestly, Justine.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Have a good blow.’

‘Hug, please?’

‘Better?’

‘Mmm.’

Chuck was right, of course. I gave myself a good talking-to on the bus home. I was totally out of line. He’d put his finger on it. This thing I had about Los was all a big illusion that was feeding on itself. The more I thought about him the more illusive he got. The memories of him were going round and round in my mind like some mad mental spin-dryer until they got worn out. Already they were fraying at the edges. Now all I could remember were little fragments: a look here, the shape of the back of his neck, the cute way he frowned like a pained Alsatian when something puzzled him, the smile lines round his mouth when he came up close. And some of these were

fading. He was like some impossibly beautiful jigsaw with pieces missing. And those missing pieces, which I had to make up, made him even more perfect.

I knew I was never going to get the guy out of my system until I could see him again in the flesh. But pursuing a male as far away as Los (a whole millennium away, which is, hang on, erm, yeah, a thousand years) is not a task a girl should take on lightly.

Mummy was pruning in the conservatory when I got home. She's got a new green gardening apron, matching gardening gloves and a green wooden trug to put the bits in. They came from the General Trading Company and they cost a fortune.

'Any messages?'

'Only the usual. Henrietta, Maxine, oh and Francesca twice. I do wish you'd let them know when you're going to be out.'

'I don't know why you can't use the answerphone like any normal person.'

'Some of *my* friends might want to call.'

'Well, you can always override.'

'Don't try and blind me with science, Justine.'

I decided to ring Franz in the vain hope of sympathy. Well, she's still my best friend – although she borrows all my clothes and trashes them, owes me loads and wouldn't think twice about blowing me out if there's a whiff of aftershave within sniffing distance – but no one's perfect.

'Still nothing?' she asked in a callously disinterested tone.

'How did you guess?'

'You've got your "entombed" voice on.'

'I can't understand it.'

'C'mon, Justine. He's not the only male on the planet.'

'He's the only one with yummy blue eyes and kinda weird but gorgeous hair and fit pecs and that way of looking at me like . . .'

Franz broke in: 'You're wallowing again.'

'I rang for sympathy.'

'No deal. You're slipping back. You were starting to get quite positive yesterday.'

'Was I?'

'Yeah, you even agreed to come out clubbing on Friday with the Pack. On the look-out for a replacement.'

'I'm not so sure about it now.'

'How d'you think you're gonna get over him if you don't find a substitute?'

'I don't want a substitute. I want him.'

'I think you're forgetting what we agreed. No retreads, Justine.'

'Yeah well, I hadn't met Los then.'

'Look, face facts, you're on to a loser. He dumped you, didn't he? Made off with his mates and left you stranded? Without a second thought.'

'Not exactly . . .'

'Remind me. What was it he was claiming as an alibi? That he was a time-traveller? Give me a break.'

'But he was. I mean is. You just don't understand. That's why he's so different. You can't judge him by the same standards as ordinary guys.'

'How convenient.' I could tell by her tone Franz's sympathy was wearing pretty thin.

'Anyway, no one can replace him. Other guys bore me rigid.'

'You're a lost cause.'

'I know.' (Sniff.)

'I'm not even talking to you in this mood.'

‘Yes you are.’

‘No I’m not.’

I heard the click as Franz cut herself off.

I knew what the problem was. Franz was revelling in the idea of having me back, nice and freshly single. Hot for pursuit. All geared up for a man-hunt. That’s how the Pack worked. We’d all get dressed up and hyped up Friday night. Perfect down to the last detail – legs waxed, teeth flossed, every eyelash curled and then we’d prowl down to the Admiral Hockerington – cool watering-hole somewhere off the King’s Road. As darkness fell and the prey came down to drink, we’d hover, let them get some bevvy down them and establish a false sense of security. Then we’d single out one or two (not the weakest but the fittest) and home in. Few males have been able to resist the combined onslaught of the whole Pack. Basically, I’m not going to be modest about this – when the four of us were in action, males were meat.

I rang Max.

‘OK. Let’s think positive. You’re still playing hard to get. That’s good,’ she said.

‘What’s good about it?’

‘You’re staying cool. You haven’t given in.’

I made no comment.

‘Justine?’

‘What?’

‘You haven’t, have you?’

‘It was only one tiny e-mail.’

‘But you promised me.’

‘I know. I had a weak moment. We’d run out of Coco Pops.’

‘Honestly, I give up on you.’

‘He probably hasn’t even seen it.’

‘What did you say?’ Max asked with a sigh.

'Not telling you.'

'It was *that* bad?'

'I only kind of suggested – um – since it was such ages – he might get in touch . . .'

'Amplify.'

'Oh, I just said I'd like to hear from him, something like that. Can't remember the exact words.'

I didn't dare admit the full truth to Max. How I'd pleaded, grovelled, humiliated myself. In verse too! Los must think I'm such a loser.

'Well it's done now. You can't erase an e-mail.'

'I know. I know.'

'Are you coming out on Friday?'

'Yes. No. Don't know.'

'Nice to hear you being so decisive,' said Max and rang off.

I rang Henry.

'I've done something really stupid.'

'So what's new?'

'I e-mailed him.'

'Oh, you're not still going on about your pathetic surfer?'

'Mmmm.'

'You don't mean to say you believed all that stuff about him coming from the future? That guy's a nutter.'

'No he's not.'

'Well you are, then. You make a good pair.'

'If only . . .'

'But you haven't heard from what's-his-name for – what? Must be practically a year by now.'

'Los, and it's forty-nine weeks, ten hours and thirty-three minutes to be precise. I've been logging it up on Daddy's Psion.'

'You are unbelievable. That guy is having you on. A

time-traveller, pur-lease. He's probably having a good old laugh at your expense with his mates right now.'

'Los isn't like that. The last e-mail he sent me – it was so-oo sensitive.'

'Oh, very New Man.'

'Well he is, as a matter of fact. Very new indeed.'

'Look, Justine, let's get one thing straight. You *can* live without men. Girls are brighter, more versatile, better at most things. No – correction – better at *everything*. Look at the statistics. We're coming top of all the exam league tables, we even read at an earlier age. We even *read*! What the hell do we need males for – apart from procreation?'

'Recreation?'

'But why does it have to be this particular one?'

'Henry, listen. This is serious. This time I think it's the real thing. No, not think – I *know* it is. It's *love*.'

This statement was greeted with a sigh of resignation. 'Definition of the "L" word, please?'

'Oh ask me something *really* simple.'

'Come on – supporting evidence, then.'

'It must be love. I can't get him out of my mind. I keep having all these flashbacks . . .'

'You make him sound like a car crash.'

'How can you be so unfeeling?'

'Accept it for what it is. Obsessive behaviour, Justine. Let's face it – what you need is therapy.'

'Ugggh!'

I hung up this time.

Oh why had I sent that message? It was so-ooo naff. The little hairs on the back of my neck stood on end with horror every time I thought about it. And I'm not going to admit what I put – even to you.

How was I ever going to overcome the humiliation?

I sat in front of Daddy's Mac, searching for inspiration. It had its big dumb screen-saver face on. I put my tongue out at it and caught my reflection as it was flung back at me.

But maybe there was a solution. I could always send another message – something which would cancel out the first one. I considered tactics. I needed to up my status, make myself somehow more desirable. *Competition* – the oldest ruse in the book. Nothing like it to bring out the red blood in a guy. Henry was right, he wasn't the only male in the world. Maybe if this was pointed out to him . . .

I logged on and tapped in the password. With a fresh e-mail page before me I hesitated, searching for those magic words that would transform Los from 'Unavailable' to 'Inseparable'.

Darling Los?

Dear Los?

Los?

Nope. From now on 'cool' was my middle name. I typed in simply:

Hiyal

How's it all going?

Ignore everything in my last e-mail. Some ghastly mix-up with my English homework. Aren't those romantic poets pa-the-tic? Talking of romance, I'm taking Franz up on that bet of hers. To see who can get off with the most guys by Christmas. Currently having the coolest time hanging out with bloke number seventeen.

If you wanna get in contact I'll be staying over at his place mainly at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/webwonderstud/cnd>

OK, so it was Chuck's e-mail address. Wonderstud – pur-lease!

Still, Los didn't have to know that, did he?

I checked through the message. That should do the trick. And then I sent it. Off it went, winging its way through space and time. So that was done. I hoped it made him nice and jealous. I hit Quit.

Hang on. What was that nasty little message on the screen?

Some messages in the Out Basket have not been sent.

Pur-lease!

Do so before disconnecting?

I selected Yes.

Another crap message came up:

Messages successfully sent: 1 of 2.

I double-checked Los's web address and sent the message again. But Dad's dumb, dated technocrap wasn't up for it. It just wouldn't co-operate. It kept bleeping back at me and coming up with pert little tight-lipped messages about an 'illicit web address', whatever that might be. I spent another ten fruitless minutes fuming over alternative ways of typing Los's address but the Apple Mac wasn't having any of it.

I resorted to stabbing angrily at those mysterious and seldom-visited keys that lurk round the edges of the keypad. I'd seen Chuck do crafty little things with the Apple and esc keys. I was sure I could fix it. Then out of the blue, the Mac had the cheek to ask in a nasty ironic manner:

Do you want to Quit?

Did I want to Quit? No, actually. I wanted to send that e-mail. I saw red at that point.

You've heard of road rage, haven't you? Well, this was the information superhighway version. Techno rage – mindless fury directed towards a persistently and, I reckoned, *intentionally* malfunctioning piece of technology. Computers have been flung from great heights for less.

‘Call yourself a PowerMac?’ I said, gritting my teeth. ‘I’ll show you who’s boss around here.’

Six ‘oh-no’ seconds later I realised I’d wiped everything. I checked back, with my palms going damp and my heart pounding. Oh no, oh no, oh no! All Daddy’s website files had gone.

I was in deep ***t, man.

I rang Chuck.

I tried to explain in plain English what I’d done.

Chuck made some amused and dismissive noises and then suddenly switched into ‘Help-Line’ mode and made some totally unfathomable enquiries.

After five minutes of this I was reduced to a kind of mental jelly. Technically brain-dead.

‘Why don’t you just reboot?’

‘Re-what?’

‘I don’t believe this! Try turning the mains switch off and then on again.’

‘Sure it won’t blow up?’

‘Justine!’

I did as he said. Magically the files reappeared.

‘You’re a genius.’

‘I know.’

‘Why do you understand all this and I don’t?’

‘I guess I’m just more evolved, that’s all.’

I did go out with the Pack that Friday night. It seemed it was National Cheer Up Justine Day and there was no backing out. We’d raided the cashpoint, planning to make an extra special night of it. And we’d managed to slip out early from school so that the four of us could engage in a little retail therapy on the way home.

As I slid my body into a new pair of Calvin black jeans, I was starting to wonder if Henry hadn’t been right about the