

Jahr Falt

# BEHAVING LIKE ADULTS







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Modern women don't believe in love. Believing in love carries roughly the same stigma as halitosis. It's as old-fashioned as going on a diet (as opposed to a detox). It suggests you have no sense of irony, and you like Meg Ryan films. A modern woman cannot accept that Father Christmas is a fraud *and* persist in believing that one sunny day her dark handsome destiny will appear in a puff of Fahrenheit and haul her off to Happy Ever After.

I know all that and yet I do believe in love. I apologize. But I can't help it. I presume it's a genetic blip which might also account for my dress sense (too pink).

I just like stuff to be nice. That's even worse. If you wish to maintain even a shred of credibility, you have to be cynical and keep your mouth in a hard straight line even when you find something funny. I'm not stupid. I do know the world is cruel. But I always like to hope that it isn't. I test my awwww! count. You proceed through the day, listing every occasion you're prompted to think awwww!

You can't cheat and hire a puppy to peep out of a basket. Often, my total is horrific.

When I started the dating agency, Rachel crowed that now I'd see what people were really like. I wouldn't believe the lies they told to get laid! She said this as if I were either a nun or a social retard who believed—despite living in a densely populated part of the planet for twenty-nine years—that seduction was about honing in on the obvious and blurting it. Whereas I'm well aware that if that were the case, the human race would have fizzled out in the Iron Age when Wilma stared at Fred and said, "That's quite a small flint-stone you've got there." Sometimes I think my friends confuse optimism with idiocy.

Of course, unpleasant characters applied. When you launch a dating agency, even if you specify as we did that Girl Meets Boy was for the "young and funky" (which no doubt deterred everyone in both of those categories), you invite weirdos to your door. It's Open Day for Oddballs. It's the Marilyn Manson Fan Club Parents Evening. But overall—despite the nutters, nerds, squares, sociopaths, oafs, half-wits, dummies, brutes, airheads, and deviants gracing our files—the *awwww!* count was immense.

Partly to distinguish ourselves from the Christians with an interest in ornithology and partly to discern if anyone out there possessed a sense of humor (a Good Sense of Humor is a luxury), we asked silly questions on the application form. Even Nige—who'd only agreed to help out because he was between acting jobs and is nosy—agreed that the hoi polloi were far wittier than he'd given them credit for. I particularly warmed to the twenty-seven-year-old man who replied to "Do you have any talents?" with "Probably not."

Girl Meets Boy began as a business, but the people who used it fast melted my heart to a soft, sticky caramel. Also, toward the end of the great fiancé fiasco (not before in case you were wondering), it did occur to me that *I* might find someone. Don't mix business with pleasure? I thought it was a phrase made up by killjoys to stop you from smiling at work. I was trying to enjoy what I'd achieved. I'd achieved so much, everyone said, I should be *so* proud. Oh, absolutely. I'd made sacrifices, but not whole lambs, more the odd chop. I should be happy.

When I'm told I should be happy, I start trying to measure it with a ruler.

Everything is a test. Rachel rings to say that the cab dropped her outside her flat, whereupon she bade farewell to a loud luxurious fart. She then turned and saw her neighbor padding up the path behind her. We howl with laughter. Yes, but is *that* happy? The cat sits on my lap, her purr rumbles through me, and I sigh—that's happy, surely? I visit the art house cinema because I hate Warner Village (Village? It's not a village!), and I feel comforted by the fact that they sell whole-grain flapjacks—even though I wouldn't eat one for a bet. I *watch* myself do this, and I think, That woman, she's smiling. But is she happy?

Self-interrogation is dangerous. Your inner voice pronounces the obvious—"You don't realize you're happy till it's gone"—as if it's your fault for not keeping an eye out, thus making you feel worse than you do already. But you're not to blame. Mostly, happiness doesn't just drop from you like an apple from a tree. It trickles away silently, evaporating over the months and years, until one day you feel a strange hollowness inside. You glance around and it hits you—despite all you own, your great, glorious success, you have nothing.

The good and therefore unreported news is that you can find it again. It might be a bit of a trek. If you haven't the least idea of your destination, the journey takes a little longer. But I'm your freshbreathed proof. Rachel was right. I *did* discover what people were really like. And yet, after everything that happened, I got happy again. I still believe in love. As I said, I can only apologize. And explain.

When Nige suggested a party to celebrate the success of Girl Meets Boy, I did wonder. I had done well, creating a company from scratch and making it pay. Although any old pinhead can create a company. They make it foolproof at Companies House. For around eighty pounds they hand you over a shrink-wrapped company. All you, the pinhead, have to do is provide the names of the

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board of directors and their share allocation. I was the director with seventy shares, and in a selfless act my younger sister, Claudia, was secretary with thirty. (This was in lieu of pay for the first month. Nige, however, preferred to resist bribes. That way, he said, he didn't feel "obligated.")

Another twenty quid to Companies House and I could name my baby Girl Meets Boy. Then, the most important part of any business plan, I found a good accountant. And that, give or take a bit of fuss, was it. My accountant did the bore's share of the paperwork, instructing me what I owed the taxman each month via apologetic E-mail. This allowed me to devote myself to my real interest: making Girl Meets Boy a hit.

My strategy was unscientific. I hoped that if I ensured that people had fun, and shelled out for advertising, financial success would follow. And after seven months it did.

So did I really want to tempt Fate and host a party? People *might* have fun, but it wasn't guaranteed. And you have to be pretty pleased with yourself to host a party. The subtext is, "I'm so interesting, I think you should all come to my home and bring wine." And parties are like cakes. They can fall flat for no apparent reason. Also, if you care the least bit about whether your guests are enjoying themselves, you are bound to have a stressed, hassled, fun-free time.

Nige, the arch manipulator, saw me hesitate and cried, "Oh go on! Everyone will have so much fun!"

I looked at his beseeching face and said, "Let's do it."

That's my weakness. I like other people. They interest me. There's hardly anyone you can't learn something from, even if it's "Check in the mirror, front *and* behind, before you go out." Nige wanted cool and exclusive, but I thought we should do the bash Elton John style: invite the world, every member of Girl Meets Boy included. I felt protective toward them, as if they were my kids. Most of them I was fond of. When people trust you, it's hard not to like them, even the annoying ones. This party would be a way of saying thanks.

My only problem was Nick. My ex-fiancé. Our relationship was over, except he hadn't moved out. He was still waiting for his friend Manjit's girlfriend to clear out her spare room (an excuse so poor I wanted to huddle it in a blanket). The truth was, he wanted me back. I was past being flattered. Nick stayed fixed at that stage of emotional development where you yowl for whichever toy is removed from your grasp. I ended it too amicably for my own good. I feel sheepish about this. I think it's far worse for the "ender" than the "endee." Especially an endee as charming and wily as Nick. He'd guilt-trip me into inviting him to the Girl Meets Boy party, then worry me like a fox all night.

Because of this, I wasn't overjoyed about going on my own. Normally, I wouldn't fret about it. If there's one thing I don't need a man for, it's to attend a party. They're a hindrance every time. But this was different. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to be fighting off Nick the entire evening. I needed a safety barrier. Also, there was something about attending a party for Girl Meets Boy without a partner that bothered me. It felt too puritan. If *I* saw me there alone, I'd be suspicious, like meeting a baker who isn't fat.

As party night loomed, Claudia—I gave her a job when it became obvious that no one else would—tried to encourage me to pick a man off the pile. "Come on, Holly," she said, poking the morning's stack of letters with polished fingernails. "It'll be like Cinderella in reverse. Just ring one up and explain who you are. They'll be thrilled. A date with the boss of Girl Meets Yob. Plucked from obscurity to attend your grand ball. The token date. It's the kind of thing that gives blokes a kick. Or—or! or! How about this. You could ask Stuart again!"

I choked. Despite my devious plan of skimming off the single cream for myself, after time spent thinking about it I'd gone off the idea. I felt maternal toward these men. Even the thirty-eight-year-olds. Thus, it would not have been healthy to shag them. Plus, I'd had one bad experience, which I'm unwilling to share because it was such a disaster. However, as I've just let slip the disaster's name, I might as well tell you, if only so you see what I was dealing with.

A month before, the PA of a solicitor named Stuart Marshall had E-mailed us, asking for an application form on his behalf. I sent it to her but couldn't resist adding, "Does he make you forge his Christmas cards too?" She replied, "That's the least of it."

Two days later Stuart's details were delivered—by courier—to our office. Stuart's rapacious misuse of company resources gave him an air of benign familiarity. Despite never having set eyes on the guy, I felt I knew him. Claudia was half in love with Stuart already. She fell on that envelope like it was a fifty-pound note.

Nige tweaked Stuart's photograph from her grasp. He arched an eyebrow, drawled, "Whiff of the Channel Five Newsreader," and spun it through the air to me. Well, possibly. Groomed like a racehorse. In blue Speedos. A lot of our clients do that—send us a snap that borders on intimate. Nige finds it "sad and grotesque," but I tend to find it more *awwww!* than *aaaagh!* It's only because they want to be accepted. They want to find someone. They're desperate to prove that they're good enough.

I understand that. It maddens me when I tell someone what I do and they sneer. We're biologically programmed to seek out nurturing relationships and yet, somehow, there are people who assume the attitude that this pursuit is trite. I tell them that those unable to empathize or forge rewarding bonds with others start by pulling the wings off bluebottles and end up breaking into people's homes and dismembering entire families. It usually shuts them up. So I was more sympathetic to Stuart than Nige was. Even when Claudia stuck her feet on the desk and started to dissect Stuart's vision of the perfect woman.

"Jesus Christ, listen to this.

"'She should have a healthy zest for life'—as opposed to an unhealthy apathy—'she should be secure in herself and her choices'—blimey, he sounds like you, Nige!" (Claudia once overheard Nige telling a fellow thespian that he "admired Brad Pitt's choices." Unbelievably, Nige wasn't referring to Gwyneth or Jennifer, but to the genius decisions Brad made when acting. Quite rightly, she's never let him forget it.)

"'Not needy, but looking to share her passion and vitality'— what an arse!—'ambitious, but probably already sorted careerwise, able to maintain a balance between work and play, prepared to make quality time for her partner and friends, interests of her own but would share a love of good food, wine, company, and exercise. She would enjoy long walks or runs along the beach'—sorry, but

who alive doesn't enjoy a long sodding walk along the beach?— 'and would enjoy riding high when I fly my plane.' Good God, is he for real? What does that mean? Is it some sort of filthy pun? I bet it's not his, I bet he hires it."

"He probably means his toy plane," suggested Nige. "He runs 'round the garden holding it above his head. He wants his perfect woman to watch from the upstairs window."

Agreed, Stuart did sound a little—no a *lot*—much, but I was intrigued. That superlative sense of self-entitlement always starts me wondering about the mother. Not the father, you'll note. Just the mother. I blame her. What a sexist. Shocking. "Go on, Claw."

Claudia grinned. "'She is ideally at least five foot seven but no taller than five foot nine, physically very active'—well, we all know what that means!—'has blond hair'—no, surprise me!—'and aged between twenty-four and twenty-nine. I would hope she has at least one relationship of respectable length behind her and has lived with a former partner. She should live in Zones One or Two'—unbloody-believable—'however, ideally she would not have any baggage (i.e., children or be divorced). She would be a female version of me.' Wow. Holly, you've got to go out with him!"

I'd tipped back on my chair to listen, and I nearly fell off it. "What? I'm nothing like that woman! No one is. And you know what I'm like about flying. I panic if the pilot has a weak chin. Anyway, why me? What have I done?"

I looked beseechingly around our cramped little office—paper everywhere; it seemed to grow from the walls and breed on the floor—hoping for Nige's support. When he pursed his lips, I knew I wasn't going to get it.

"It's what you haven't done," he said. "You need to take action, Holly. Show Nick that it's over. I know you're still fond of each other, but it's not wise, him still lurking 'round the house. You need him to witness that you've moved on to better things. Claw is right. Stuart is just the pissing contest that Nick needs. You needn't teil Stuart who you are. I'll ring him, tell him Girl Meets Yob is giving him a free, er, trial. If we deem an applicant to be, ah, a VIP, we don't put them straight into a speed-dating session. We assign them what we call a 'free-range' date with an elite

counterpart that's unsupervised and can last as long as they wish. How's that sound?"

"Like bullshit," I said.

Claw started banging her fists on the desk, shouting, "Yes, yes, yes!"

While I am old enough not to be intimidated by two people disagreeing with me, I am also wise enough to know when to save my breath. "I'll think about it," I lied. Well, I thought I was lying, but my mind had other ideas. It danced around Stuart the whole day. I want to make this clear, I wasn't attracted to Stuart—I'm not an insane sadomasochist who doesn't know Hitler's CV when she sees it—but Nige was right.

I was still fond of Nick, dangerously fond. We'd gone out for five years, most of which were good, great even. And then we'd coasted. We were two parallel lines, always close but never together. Occasionally, we'd have a passionate quarrel during which many promises would be made. But not kept. Nick admitted that he didn't know how to make an effort in a relationship. I was his first, as he put it, Big One. Incidentally, when I say "effort" I don't mean he didn't send enough roses or stud the walls with little love notes (although he didn't). I mean he didn't talk much, wash enough, or seem to take particular pleasure in my company. Don't do me any favors.

But if I had to pinpoint the single factor that drove me to Stuart, it was the Febreze. As Claudia and Nige hummed about me, murmuring, "Go on, Holly. Oh please, it'll be fun," I thought of Nick, too lazy to shower, spraying his stinky feet with Febreze ("safely eliminates odors on fabrics and kills the bacteria that cause them"). And then a ripple of hard-done-by billowed airily through me and I thought, Ah, why not? What harm can it do?

How long have you got?



thought I was good at reading people. Is there anyone in the world who doesn't think they're good at reading people? I shouldn't have trusted myself. My judgment had already proved faulty with Nick. Why did I presume to know Stuart? The truth is, I'd painted my life into a corner. Instead of freeing me, every choice I'd made hemmed me in. It's a pity to regret, but I did. I needed an escape. And if you're dying in a desert, you'll see hope in air and dust.

I refuse to begin with Stuart, though. He'd love that, if I began with him. The best way to gall people who wish you ill is not to give them space in your head. There's a great putdown in *Casablanca*, where Peter Lorre says to Humphrey Bogart, "You despise me, don't you?" He replies, "Well if I gave you any thought I probably would." I think that's funny. So I'll start with me and Nick.

Five years ago, when I met Nick, he was helping a duck. I was driving through one of the quainter parts of London and I saw this duck waddling along the pavement. A thin young man with a cigarette hanging out his mouth sauntered behind at a respectful distance from madam's tail feathers, ushering her away from the road. Everyone was ignoring them. Londoners are good at this. We can ignore *anything*. That disappoints me. I get a kick when I say hello to the ticket guy at my tube stop and he says, "All right, darlin'," and gives me a high five. It turns my city into a village.

Anyhow, I got the urge to offer the man and the duck a lift. I decided there was no way this guy was a lunatic, as he was helping a duck. So I swerved across the traffic and buzzed down my window. "Excuse me," I said, launching into one of the silliest sentences I've