

TANGO

smart talk about love

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strike a match!

Despite the popularity of online dating, many singles are increasingly relying on professional matchmakers to help them find love. Marnie Hanel hires three expert cupids to get a new take on the world's second-oldest profession.

LISA RONIS IS SITTING IN A COFFEE SHOP with her French hound, Stella, leaving a sparkling message: "I've found the man for you. His name is John. He's hilarious, sexy, and I've given him your number. Let's chat!"

For most people this would be a social call, but Ronis is hard at work. She is a professional matchmaker, a member of a booming industry that exists nationwide. There are over 1,000 private matchmakers in the United States today, according to Marketdata Enterprises, a research group in Florida. And there's even a school to train them: The Matchmaking Institute in New York

City molds novice meddlers into professional love brokers.

"Matchmaking is a hot profession right now," says Lisa Clampitt, the institute's cofounder and executive director. "It's the next real estate! Our class size has tripled in the past three years."

She attributes this growth to the rise of the Internet. "The online dating industry has mainstreamed the idea of having a third party facilitate your love life," Clampitt explains. "But there's a lot of misinformation online. Married people pretend to be single. People lie about their age, height, weight. That's where a matchmaker comes in; they prescreen your date before you even get there."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BELICTA CASTELBARCO

"It's all about efficiency," says Rachel Greenwald, a professional matchmaker in Colorado. "If, say, you're a busy executive, a third party setup saves you the time it takes to slog through all the dating arenas—spending hours at a crowded party only to go home having met no one."

It may not be as strange as it sounds to outsource your love life. As Janis Spindel, a New York City matchmaker, puts it, "It's perfectly acceptable to hire professionals to do something better than you could do it yourself—even find a mate."

Beyond this logical appeal, there's an emotional pull: It's comforting to think that someone else can guide you through a precarious patch of life with relative ease. If you are someone who is too shy or too busy to "get out there"—or, worse, realizes that being "out there" usually ends in disappointment and heartache—having a pro in your court can force you to make better choices. "A good matchmaker can help you evaluate your past relationships and break your bad habits," says Ronis. "I've had clients who have said, 'She's not for me; she's not pretty enough,' or 'He's not for me, he's not funny.' I make them go on a second date and—boom!—they're married with two kids."

When matchmaking succeeds, all parties win: The client snags a life partner, the matchmaker a handbag of cash. Pricing structures vary, but most include an initial consultation fee, a dating package price, and a marriage bonus. (Bonuses can be cash, or even a car or a trip.) The matchmakers approached for this story charge anywhere from \$7,500 to \$100,000 for packages ranging from eight dates to a year of service.

Since it's one thing to hear about the wonders of matchmaking from those who sell the service and quite another to experience it yourself, I decided to test the viability of this venerable institution by asking three matchmakers to work their magic on me. Here's what happened.

MATCHMAKER #1

Rachel Greenwald, author of *Find a Husband After 35 (Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School)*, believes in the efficacy of business tactics in every circumstance—even love. As such, she sees herself less as an Edith Wharton-style matchmaker and more as a headhunter for an executive search. She charges \$500 for a one-hour coaching session, \$1,500 for an all-day private coaching session, and \$5,000 to \$100,000 for various matchmaking packages, tiered by duration.

Greenwald accepts just a handful of high-end clients, and rejects 75 percent of those who approach her. They can't commit to a realistic relationship, she says, so she can't help them. For example, she has turned down "men who are attractive and successful and only want to date beautiful, perfect women within a very specific age range" and "women over 40 who are looking for something that doesn't exist: a 38-to 45-year-old man who wants to have a family. That's unfair. How can a 42-year-old woman guarantee children?"



Janis Spindel expects her clients to find a match by the third attempt; if they do not, there is something wrong with them.

At Greenwald's rates, I cannot afford to buy love, so she accepts me pro-bono as a long distance client. (She lives in Denver and usually requires a visit.) The condition? That I'll play by her rules. This is harder than it sounds. First, she demands that I internalize her maxim: "Be open to finding love in different packages." (I have to admit that all of my boyfriends could fit into the same shoebox: handsome and charming, if ultimately impossible.) She also forces me to read a 1980s self-help book called *How to Stop Looking for Someone Perfect and Find Someone to Love*, by Judith Sills, PhD. I am so embarrassed by the title that I staple a postcard to the cover. But I do read it. So you don't have to, here it is in a nutshell: Widen your pool and accept people for who they really are. Be open-minded, not judgmental.

Next, Greenwald asks me who I'm looking for. I describe him: smart, playful, ambitious, grounded, clever, handsome, confident, kind (you know, Patrick Dempsey). She also allows me one deal-breaker. I select: He must want to have children, eventually.

Just three days later, I open my email to find an investment banker waiting for me. Kevin* is 34, 5'10", Canadian, well-educated, well-traveled, athletic, and handsome. It looks like his photo was taken in Capri, or another Mediterranean destination I'd happily visit. I imagine myself on the other side of the camera. Click.

But there is a catch. And the catch is 5 years old, a daughter who is "a big part of his life," and the result of a broken engagement. As excited as I initially was about the date, suddenly I am not. I can picture myself being a mother, but the image is conditional. This is not it.

Greenwald reads my mind and sends me another email. "Don't say 'Ooooh, that stepmom thing wouldn't be for me, I could never...' Whatever the stereotype is, try to set it aside and see what's really there." And since she has the life I want—a happy marriage and three kids—I decide to listen to her, and approach the date neutrally.

Kevin greets me with an extra-wide smile, and I am so pleased. (Let's just say: His photo delivers). I am less pleased when he asks all three of my pet-peeve questions, which are (in order of appearance): "What do you do for fun?" "What do you look for in a guy?" and "You're so pretty, why don't you have a boyfriend?" I can sense "What kind of music do you listen to?" on the tip of his tongue, so I steer the conversation toward film, television, and books. Usually, this is a winning trifecta, but Kevin watches children's movies and reads about finance.

I do not.

But, just when I'm ready to write him off entirely, the conversation turns to something he's passionate about: his daughter. She talked him into buying a four-pound dog, and I picture this ex-hockey player walking it, pink leash in tow. I like him more, instantly. Two glasses of wine later, he pulls on his jacket. When he does, he holds his cuffs in his fists so that his

**Name has been changed.*

shirt won't bunch in his coat sleeves. It's been a long time since I've done that, or seen anyone over the age of 10 do it, and I think: This is a man who really cares for someone. How can that be a bad thing? So when he walks me home and suggests a second date, I withhold judgment. I am open. Yes, yes, yes.

MATCHMAKER #2

Janis Spindel is a notorious New York yenta, the type of woman who can subordinate a crowd with a single arch comment. She only accepts male clients, with a 12-month contract starting at \$50,000 in state and \$100,000 out of state (plus her expenses: first-class flights and tony hotels). She says she has matched 760 married couples, 1,100 committed couples, 40 presently engaged couples, and more Hollywood couples than you could count. "My record," she says, "speaks for itself." (Of course, there is no way to verify it.) She expects her clients to find a match by the third attempt; if they do not, there is something wrong with them. She claims all of the other matchmakers are "wannabes." She believes she is clairvoyant.

I meet Spindel at a "Natural Selection" speed-dating event hosted by the website Pocket Change NYC. To qualify, men must present financial information proving that they're very, very rich. If accepted, they pay \$500 to attend. Women submit photos proving that they're very, very beautiful. If accepted, they pay \$50.

When I walk through the door—tired, with a cold—Spindel is the first person to greet me. "Are you one of the girls?" she says. And I tell her: No, I'm a reporter covering the event. But it's too late, Spindel is off and running, playing her favorite game.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"How old are you?"

"Where are you from?"

"How tall are you?"

"How much do you weigh?"

I answer the questions in rapid succession. (I challenge you to lie to Spindel.) And she briskly concludes, "You have blue eyes. I'm going to find you a husband."

Spindel is perfectly groomed in a champagne-colored evening gown, but tonight's event falls near the matchmaker's Super Bowl, Valentine's Day, and the stress is getting to her. She describes how she selected 40 finalists from a pool of 920 applicants, explaining, "I wanted to get a diverse group of girls, everyone from the girl next door to the sexy exotic," and predicts 65 percent of the men, two-thirds of whom are her clients, will end the night paired up. She's about to launch into a practiced sound bite about her service ("I am their mother, their shrink, their shoulder to cry on...") when her cell phone rings. She takes the call, hangs up, and then—just for a moment—loses her cool.

"These guys are CEOs! They run Fortune 500 companies! And they can't figure out what to buy for fucking Valentine's Day?" Seconds later, she's back to her composed, savvy self, but I'm

thrown by the glimpse of her underbelly. It's like cracking the crust of a *crème brûlée*: When it's done, it's done. She regains control by asking for my card. "You must come in for an interview," she says.

It takes a moment before I realize that *she* wants to interview *me*.

When I arrive in the lobby of her building on the Upper East Side, she's running a bit late. So while I wait, I check out the woman Spindel is interviewing before me. She is gorgeous in a Ralph Lauren way, with olive skin and wavy brown hair. (It's quite possible she arrived on horseback.) Although Spindel holds open calls in various cities to audition prospective girls for her "inventory," the pool from which she matches her clients, this is a private appointment. Spindel says she has more than 8,000 women in her data bank, but "remembers the good ones."

She'll remember this one. And although I arrived suspicious of Spindel's system, I look at Ralph Lauren and wonder.

When I sit down, Spindel goes straight to the interrogation. "What religion are you? What do you see when you look in the mirror? What do you do on the weekends?" She nods in approval at most of my answers, although at one point, after I reveal I won a scholarship to college, she says, "Are you some kind of brainiac?" From her tone, you'd think she was asking if I had ringworm.

By the time our interview is over, Spindel has informed me of two things. One: "You are exactly what men are looking for." Two: "I know who you are going to marry. He's tall, gorgeous, sexy—the managing director of a hedge fund." I ask if we can meet in time for this article and Spindel snaps, "Do you think finding your husband is a magazine stunt?"

Fortunately, she doesn't have time to be mad. She's running late. And she's on CNN and she's packing for a trip and she's juggling a million things. "He'll call you," she says, and I believe her.

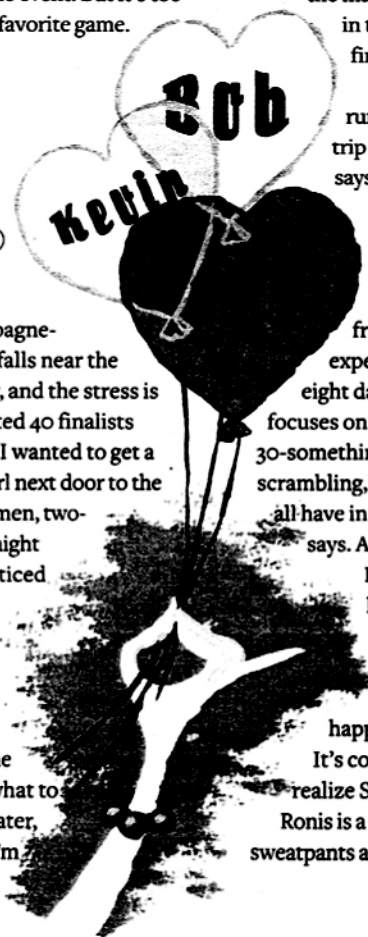
He doesn't.

MATCHMAKER #3

Lisa Ronis, who considers herself "a girl's best friend," arranges my last two dates. She's the least expensive of my matchmakers, charging just \$7,500 for eight dates. Although she has a handful of male clients, she focuses on women. Three types approach her, she says: the 30-something professional who "realizes her eggs are scrambling," the divorcee, and the older woman. What do they all have in common? "They lack access to new men," Ronis says. And that's what she delivers.

Ronis may be almost 30 years older than I, but we're living the same life. This is the best part of working with her: She married early, divorced before 30, and is single—so she knows exactly what you're going through. It is also the worst: She didn't make it happen for herself, so how's she going to do it for you? It's confusing, like watching *Sex and the City* after you realize Samantha Jones is pushing 50.

Ronis is a realist. "Men are visual creatures. If you show up in sweatpants and say, 'He's going to love me for me' you may be



single till you're 60," she says. "Do the best with what you've got! Blow out your hair, get a manicure, dress up." She's also a creative businesswoman, exchanging her services for haircuts, publicity, well-placed tables at restaurants. But mostly, Ronis is kind. You could call her at 4 A.M. in tears and she wouldn't mind; she'd remind you about how special you are, and she would mean it.

Over a sushi lunch, Ronis jots down what I'm looking for in a little spiral notebook. Midway through her spicy tuna roll, she stares dreamily into the distance. "Bob*," she says, as though she's looking for her glasses. "And Joe*." Then she explains that she only arranges blind dates, so no photos will be exchanged. That's her rule.

I understand the principle, but when I walk into the restaurant for my first date I wish I could have had the teeniest warning. Bob is short. Really short. We're talking 5'4". And in the three-inch heels I wore to appeal to this "visual creature," I am 5'10".

Height isn't everything, but it's everything to Bob, who also seems way too old for me. At one point in our conversation, he asks if I have a type. Realizing that he lacks a single overlapping quality with any of my past boyfriends, I say, "No, not really."

"Have you ever dated anyone shorter than you?" he presses.

"No."

"Then you have a type."

Case closed.

It's pretty depressing to be out with someone who knows he has no chance. Whereas normally, your date brings up a film and suggests you see it together, Bob brings up a restaurant and suggests I go with my friends. At the end of the evening, when my cab pulls away, I wonder why I was set up with this man to begin with. And then I remember: Bob is a client. He's guaranteed eight dates. I am one of them.

Joe, on the other hand, is a member of Ronis's inventory. "You'll fall in love with him in 16 seconds," she says, and my expectations skyrocket.

Unfortunately for Joe, our first 16 seconds is on the phone, and his attempts at humor fall flat.

"Dating in New York is so confusing. In most places you pick a girl up in your car, take her out to dinner, and drop her off in your car. Not here. I have half a mind to rent a horse-and-buggy."

"When I'm 60, I want to be drinking Mai Tais on the beach. You can join me if you like."

So even though Joe looks good on paper—6 feet tall, Ivy League educated—I'm not that excited for our date. When he calls, day-of, without a plan, I'm even less excited, and when he calls at 6:30 P.M. to tell me where we're going for an 8 P.M. dinner, I want to kill him.

"How are you going to recognize me without a photo?" I say.

"I know how you look from your voice," he replies. It turns out, Joe knows I'm blonde, whereas I'm actually brunette. My voice has lied.

Needless to say, I do not get my hair blown out, or get a manicure, or wear a dress. I arrive 15 minutes late, in jeans, already anticipating the end of the evening. The restaurant is bustling—Gwyneth Paltrow is dining in the back—and it takes me a minute to spot Joe. When I do, I'm pleasantly surprised. He's very sweet-looking, with a scruffy dark-blond beard and a well-intended, if poorly executed, outfit: tweed blazer, collared shirt, jeans. The chemistry isn't instant, but I like him. The night will be okay. And then he pulls out the wild card...

"See that funny-looking guy over there?" he says, and points, "I ran into a friend from college, he's saving your seat."

The crowd is so thick that I can't see the barstool, much less the man in it, and I'm annoyed; the awkwardness of one stranger is enough. But then I see him: 6'5", big hands, great smile, handsome. He may just be the man I described to my matchmakers. We shake. His name is Elliot*.

I swoon a little bit, on the inside, while Elliot turns to Joe and says, "You're a lucky man."

The connection is instant, almost embarrassing, and it gets even worse one hour later when two seats open up at the bar next to Elliot. Joe, against all survival instincts, decides to take them and offers me the middle. And for the next three courses I'm on two blind dates: one of them good, the other tepid.

The tension is so awkward that I start thinking about ways to get rid of Joe. Before long, I spot my out: a darling brunette. I draw the woman, Danielle, into our conversation and make sure she and Joe realize how much they have in common. As the evening fizzles, I secure Danielle's details. I head home, alone.

The next day, I set them up.

Danielle is thrilled. She writes, "This has just been added to my list of good things." So is Joe. "Not sure how serious you are about this matchmaking thing, but I have to say you are putting a good foot forward," he tells me.

Ronis is less pleased, but understands. "I am very possessive of my male inventory, but I never want to get in the way of fate," she says.

And I have to say, for that morning, the joy of success justifies my various matchmaking adventures. I feel like Emma, Jane Austen's quintessential cupid, when she says, "[Matchmaking] is the greatest amusement in the world!"

You could call it an altruistic high. But I'd be lying if I said that was all I was after.

One week later, I got exactly what I wanted: an email from Elliot.

"Great meeting you last week. Joe was kind enough to pass on your email address. I'm around next week, so we should get together for a dinner. Off the record, though..."

And it is. ❧

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He's guaranteed eight dates.**