



# The Challenges of Finding Love

Compiled by  
Robin Barratt

# **The Challenges of Finding Love**

Compiled and edited by Robin Barratt with...

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*"...he took the rotundity of the moon, and the curves of creepers, and the clinging of tendrils, and the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of the reed, and the bloom of flowers, and the lightness of deer, and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of the winds, and the timidity of hare, and the vanity of peacock, and the softness of the parrot's bosom, and the hardness of diamond, and the cruelty of the tiger, and the hot glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of dove, and the fidelity of the drake. Compounding all this together, he made woman and gave her to man."*

*Unknown Hindu author*

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# INTRODUCTION

Whether married or single, having had just the one partner or many, living in a bustling Western metropolis or in a remote village in Asia, do all women around the world have the same expectations and experiences of relationships and love? Or do they differ depending upon their location, nationality and culture?

What women really want in a relationship, what men really want, and how they can often be so very different is an undeniably fascinating subject, and in this compelling, often thought-provoking, occasionally funny and at times even heart-breaking collection, forty-one writers from fifteen cultures and countries worldwide (*America, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, England, Germany, India, Ireland, Malta, Nigeria, Pakistan, Scotland, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Wales*) discuss openly and honestly, and in their own unique way, their relationships and the challenges they have faced (and continue to face) with finding love... and why it often goes so terribly wrong.

Is there a definitive answer as to what *every* woman wants in a relationship, no matter her culture, nationality or background? Or maybe, more importantly, should we perhaps be asking what they don't want? I'll let you decide after reading this book.

Enjoy the read!

Robin Barratt – Editor, publisher and counsellor

**“The course of true love never did  
run smooth.”**  
*William Shakespeare*

# SANDRA

Age: 27

Nationality: Nigerian

Place of Residence: Nigeria

I arrived at my one room apartment at about 9pm Sunday night, after what seemed like the best hang-out I ever had with my girls – Tamara and Amaka - even though it started on a saggy note.

After eating my left over fufu and egusi soup from the previous night, I took a long shower and slipped into my soft pink cotton nightwear with a socks and hair net. It's usually cold this time of August in Abuja. The rains crash in every evening and won't stop till 6am the next day. Without any real relationship at the moment, I had the company of social media networks and my blog.

Before that, I sat on my high spring bed, turned down the volume of my TV set, blurred the noise from the heavy downpour on my rooftop and cradled my laptop on my crossed legs ready to write about my experience. One question toggled my chest a bit as I stared at my pale white wall,

“How much of a necessity are these evils - men?”

I riveted my gaze to the blank word document opened before me and wondered if men had a meeting day or place where they planned how to be insensitive, callous and insecure, or if they together came up with strategies to cheat on beautiful, good women who love them. That's when it came to me... *It's crazy how we endure family and peer pressures early in life and end up having relationship pressures throughout life.*

We have known each other since our secondary school days, perhaps that was why we shared certain similarities in our beliefs that the men who walk, float, barge or run into our lives had serious ISSUES with understanding Love.

Amy is the strongest and oldest one of us, always blunt, optimistic and result oriented. One would think that the Nigerian man will be grateful to have her on his side but *No*, he doesn't want a 'ride or die,' or a partner, he would rather have a slave or sacrificial lamb because he or his mother crowned him God early in life. The kind of guts and boldness Amy exudes frightens him. He is intimidated by her successes and achievements, and the fact that he doesn't understand how someone termed so feeble can be so much. And since stupidity is termed humility in this region, he would prefer to settle for something cheaper and less challenging. That's how we have come to be stagnant and less productive as a people.

I, on the other hand, happened to be the 'unserious one.' I am the indoor girl, quite bookish but also very pretty with little or no

fashion sense. The only relationship I seem to be able to hold on to is my art. My friends say I flinch at the sight of the smallest threat... well, maybe that's because I value myself and time more than silly relationship issues that steal one's time, freedom, self esteem and sometimes life - trust me I have seen quite a number and I prefer to let other people's experience be my teacher. On the contrary, I am not heartless, in fact I can be likened to one of those very emotional persons secretly praying to find the love that will sweep me off my feet. And I am not a coward either, I just realized that the few times I have put myself out there I got hurt by undeserving philistines - allow me to take a chill pill here.

Tamara, or Tammy as we call her, was the mildest of us and also the only one who got to experience every girl's dream of walking down the aisle with the man she loved. Five years down the line: "I am leaving Tommy, I have had enough," she announced that Sunday afternoon as we entered Oma's Saloon. Thomas was her high-school sweet heart, so Amy and I chorused, "Why?"

"Tommy is cheating on me."

"Finally, she realizes!" Amy responded before she could catch herself.

"How did you find out?" I stepped in immediately.

"I knew about it for quite a while but I kept forgiving him and did not tell you girls because I didn't want you to laugh at me."

"Why do you think we will laugh at you, Tammy?" I asked, faking innocence.

"We already knew but we never brought it up too. Did not want you to feel we wished your marriage ill luck." Amy said and I eyeballed her for not understanding the timing.

"He doesn't know my worth. I deserve more," Tammy continued as though she did not hear us. "I have confronted him about how much I have given up these passed years to make sure we have a happy home, do you know what he said?"

"Tell us" everyone in the saloon chorused.

"Well, he said men are polygamous by nature so I had no right to complain. And he felt that I was ungrateful because he thought that he had given me what I wanted from the beginning - marriage... All I had to do was make the time we had together count by raising us good children. I mean, I thought a relationship was about two people? Two good people who love each other. Two people who work together. Two people who make each other better. Can you imagine that Tommy was playing the victim? And I had to apologize for upsetting him?"

"Let me guess, because you're a woman?" Amy chipped in quickly.

"Of course." Tammy continued, "If I upset him, I have to apologize. If he upsets me I still have to apologize because I am a

humble and submissive wife. No one questions the man for abuse of power. Not even his family."

"Talking about family, why not talk to his family about his cheating? There may be someone he listens to." I asked.

"You think I have not tried? They have talked to him and still no improvements, yet they are telling me to understand and turn a blind eye to save our marriage. But what about me? No one cares what I want or how I feel... will they understand and turn a blind eye if I were the one committing adultery?"

"Say what?" the women in the saloon chorused and broke into different discussions about relationships and how women are treated by the men they love. While I observed the rowdiness of the saloon hall, and the passion with which each woman narrated her ordeals to anyone who cared to listen, I concluded that something must be amiss. It is either we really don't know what love is, or we really don't know what love is.

"You've been with Tommy for too long I cannot imagine you without him anymore. Can you imagine yourself without him?" Amaka asked Tammy finally. I could see Tammy struggling for the right answer to give when Amy added: "The society we live in is cruel to every woman, whether you are married or single, and they become worse to you when you even get divorced."

"That's true," I had to agree with her. "You hear things like 'she was not trained properly that's why she could not keep her home'. Or 'She doesn't want to be controlled. She is rebellious and cannot be under any man, that's why she left the only man who managed to marry her...'" one light-skinned Yoruba woman who had been quiet in the corner of this averagely equipped saloon finally spoke and everywhere fell silent.

"Everyone expects the woman to endure but when she is killed by her spouse they ask: 'Why did she not leave him soonest?'" She got up from her seat and walked slowly to the centre of the room. She was a hefty woman, typical of a well-fed African woman and the jewellery she wore depicted her class. She was no pauper or a stranger to money. "Pardon me, I have been following your discourse. I just lost a dear friend to her spouse because she wanted to save her relationship at all cost. Maybe she thought she could change him, as we often think." She paused and blew into her white handkerchief briefly before continuing. "They used to be so in love when only Bola had a job. Her little was just enough for them to share and I began to think I could define love by them. Soon after Bola helped her husband secure a job in her place of work, the fights began. He beat her sore, almost every day she was at the doctor, yet she would never admit that he hit her. It is either she fell, or something fell on her. Finally, he killed her, by accident he says. It did not make the news, but if it was the other way round..." My mind

veered into the distant as the woman who later gave her name as Iyabo went on about some other issues women face in relationships because they believed they were in love. When she was done, she paid the hairdresser and left us gaping.

"Did you ever think Tommy loved you?" I found myself asking Tammy, who still stared after Iyabo.

"Are you serious right now?" Tammy asked, trying to suppress the tears that burned her chest.

"Come on, don't cry." Amy replied. "Breaking up and moving on is not the end of the world." Amy adjusted when she realized how lame her joke was. "At least you're not the one being told she has unrealistic high expectations for a spouse. You already have a child of your own, while I am here contemplating being someone's babymama at the moment. Since when is it wrong to be independent? If I couldn't do anything for myself, I will be termed lazy and small-minded. I have my own house, cars and money and only need him for his love, he considers me a rival and unlovable or in the street term – *zero yards of wife material.*"

"That's not helping Amy." I observed as Tammy just stared blankly. "Did you ever feel you were loved by Tommy?" I repeated.

"YES!" Tammy replied wide-eyed.

"So what happened?" I was unrelenting.

"Change happened," Tammy replied reluctantly.

"Change happens to us all," Amy added.

"No, I mean Tommy really changed. He used to almost beg me to be his... I mean this seriously, he did everything I asked even those I did not ask because he wanted me to be his. And now... it feels as if... as if all the love just faded away."

"Let me explain this simply; gone are the days when men used to be warriors, when they used to understand honour and valour. Now they are raised as hunters who, after one kill, are going after the next game. Unfortunately, we are the ones who bear the brunt." Mrs. Oma spoke succinctly leaving every woman in the saloon stunned at her understanding. "What? A hairdresser cannot have an opinion?"

Everyone laughed.

"You really are going through with it?" Amy asked Tammy finally.

"Yes. I want to."

"Well, it is all about what makes *you* happy Tammy. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty for whatever choice you make."

"I thought love was supposed to be the simplest thing on earth. How come it is so complicated?" I asked almost under my breath but loud enough for my sixteen year old beautician Toyin to pick up.

"Aunty, love is as you define it."

"Really?" I inquired, staring at her as she made the final designs on my finger nails.

"Yes ma," she replied without taking her eyes off her work for once.

"Tell me what you know about love." I insisted and now my friends were interested in what this young beauty had to say.

"Aunty, I may not know so much, but I believe the concept of love has been highly romanticized that we all forget about responsibility, sacrifice and most importantly understanding in the pursuit of our fantasies."

"Hmmm," my friends and I chorused in disbelief. It was a wonder in this part of the world for a younger one to have not just an opinion but a better opinion. Now, she had our attention.

"I think that when a man shelters a woman, he provides for her, and also protects her, therefore he loves her."

"Not entirely true, but I'm listening," I said.

"When he feeds her and gives her money, he also loves her. When a man corrects a woman, no matter the measure he uses, like my father who beats my mother when she is wrong; she tells me he loves her that's why he beats her to correct her."

"WHAT!" I can't count how many of us chorused that, but at this point I felt sorry for Toyin, who was growing up to believe it was okay to be beaten by her lover.

"Love..."

"Enough." Tammy interrupted my sixteen year-old love tutor. "I'm sure your mother needs some medical attention, but love is nothing like what you just described. Yes, we are not promised the rain or sun everyday, but what makes love *Love*, is knowing that you won't be in it alone, which unfortunately happens in most Nigerian relationships where a man claims to love a woman. Instead of working with his partner in changing the situation, the society which is a patriarchal one, believes in changing the person - the woman - while the man is taught to be dictator and not lover."

"Imagine a man telling me that I am invalid until I have a man to validate me. My God!" Amy scowled. "It is true that love is a responsibility, because you may or may not plan for it, but you choose to stay in it. It is sacrifice because you decide to let another person into your space and most times you have different orientations about life, but to achieve balance the two must shed certain characteristics or attitude. Understanding in a relationship comes from accepting that no one is perfect, and it is okay to have a flaw or make a mistake without being judged."

"Too bad no one schooled our men, so we suffer." I added with a smirk "The good news is that, we are women and we will have sons or already have sons. We can start now to reshape our society by teaching our boys that it is okay to care, it is not weakness to let

their emotions show and it is duty to love his woman in a million ways. If this is what he spends his life trying to achieve, it is a good course because he will live longer and happier." Every woman including Tammy agreed.

We just lost power in my neighbourhood and I'm not sure we will have any electricity tonight since the rain has doubled. I think I will just save this work, shut down my laptop and hug my pillow tightly till the night passes.

**“There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness.”**

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

# MORVEN

Age: 24

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

Where shall I start...? Perhaps with the fact that I've never had a relationship: it's not that I'm religious, or that I'm waiting for the right/deserving person - it just hasn't happened. I have had, let's call them experiences, none of which I would say were good. From these experiences, and past traumas, nowadays I've become insecure and somewhat paranoid about anyone who expresses an interest. Pair that with having increasingly high standards, being introverted, and living in an area favoured by families and the older generation, have led me to feel like I'm closed off to the possibility of a relationship. This doesn't mean that I'm against love: I love love. I want to love. I want to be loved. Love is one of the best things on this planet.

Technically, I am loved and do love... families and friends do count! But it's not the love that everyone goes on about, the love that seems to surround me. There's a quote from *The Handmaid's Tale* that I think personifies love perfectly: *'It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant, a creature from outer space.'* I've always been told that your twenties are your promiscuous decade, where judgement is not allowed. I see it as a decade of trying to out do each other, decade of pressure to perform. I think most of this pressure comes from the people around you, but also the media. The media's presence and influence worldwide is so gargantuan that it seeps into everyone, whether they like it or not! Just writing about this, without really getting started, feels like a cop-out, but when you have things like the *Daily Mail's Femail* page: a love song to all things make-up, fashion, hair, and celeb gossip, it can't not be a factor to how a woman sees a man, and a man sees a woman. Yes, it isn't a 100% negative outlook on things, but it generates negative power, and makes the quest that much harder. Negative power that tends to find positive power, and then chaos begins where both men and women are guilty of having the wrong attitudes.

Also, the media highlights the dangers of love: all those stories of women, sometimes men and/or children, who are found naked, sexually assaulted and often killed in hotel rooms, or in the woods. The perpetrator being an ex, or someone they met through an online dating site. This is a big reason, I believe, that so many people choose to be single now, and follow a list of precautions; drawing the curtains, locks on the doors and windows, rape alarms, that little cat knife knuckle-duster thing you can get, and the classic

avoiding certain places altogether.

Another reason why media is a concern is that it's a male dominated world - look at this book as an example of special attention that's needed for women to be heard. Men controlling what men read about women, and what women read about men - this is what leads to those odd stories that make you think 'that still happens?' Or 'do people still have those views? It's not the '50s anymore!'

Sometimes I feel abnormal when people question me about my personal life, because it's always; 'How's your love life?' or 'Found anyone special yet?' I react normally by putting my walls up, but every now and then I lie and conjure up some potential romantic interest. Of course this just makes it harder for me to move on any real interest. I would say I'm a problem, or I create one, so it doesn't have the chance of reaching 'the relationship' stage. I put this down to the lack of a real father figure, and my uncle Stephen; a man that should've protected me but instead preyed upon me when I was far too young to understand what was going on. Trust and security is a factor that I think men get wrong, from my experience, which is a shame as I think these are two of the most important things to look for in a man, and in a relationship. It all stems from Stephen and dad. It was too late for dozens of others, but thank God for my sister who spoke up before it was too late for me and I became more damaged than I was already was/am.

My uncle's predatory nature, mixed with my father abandoning me and my siblings, with our neglectful mother - both when I was a pre-teen - I believe has set me up to view relationships in a different way. To view men in a different way. To return to *The Handmaid's Tale* (can you tell I was reading it before writing this?), Offred is reminiscing about love and thinks about men: '*Who knows what they do, on their own or with other men? Who knows what they say? Who can tell what they really are? Under their daily-ness?*' Mix in the cognitive differences between man and woman and I see a big way in how men get it wrong, or perceive to be getting it wrong. For example, men are better at shifting their attention quickly, whether this is a menial task, or a huge life decision, say, getting cold feet at the altar.

Also, men are generally slower at social cognition, and respond better to anger, aggression, and threatening cues. They favour concepts related to extreme experience, whilst women prefer predictable and controlled routines.

That's me! I'm a girl of routine.

I believe that these are heavy precursors to what most (myself included) women want in a relationship. Stability, security, and satisfaction. The three S's.

Men, on the other hand, require variety. I read this in an

article not long ago. But apparently men need a change in circumstances regularly or they get bored. Granted this article was about sex, but sex is an important part of any relationship, as we all know. See all the men who leave their wives of decades for a twenty-something year-old, I bet one of the reasons is a lack of sex, or a lack of change within their sex life. Long story short, men need sex and a reasonable amount of it. Women don't feel like they're dying from lack of sex and/or factor in comfort.

Females like conversation, we're better at it. It's been proven! Ladies have a higher level of speech production, we're also superior at discriminating between vocal and facial expressions, regardless of valence.

Why is it that my perfect man is Jason Momoa? A creative, intellectual who expresses stereotypical male traits but is in touch with his feminine side and fully respects the opposite sex. In my opinion he's a real man. Shame he's married.

Anyway... a man who's not afraid to show his true self is a wonderful thing and, personally, something I'm looking for in a man. It's something that all women should be looking for.

Perhaps I still have a teenager's mentality about love as most of my experiences with the opposite sex were in my teens. And I've never left home, I have my mother and a couple of siblings as my safety net. As much as I'm perfectly comfortable with this, I think it influences a person's mental state/age. I don't mean this in an 'I'm mentally ill' way, as I would never make victims of mentally ill people (my two brothers have mental health issues), what I mean is I haven't fully matured, so why would my mind take the next step when there doesn't appear to be a reason to do so? I think this is crucial to both sexes to have, or to seek an independent person. Why else is 'baggage' such a turn-off for some people? But this is an increasingly difficult trait to find these days, for the younger generation at least, due to the financial climate. Case in point: me.

My biggest moments when I was a teenager were all awkward and uncomfortable, for their various reasons. Whether it was embarrassment in front of all my friends, or completely unwanted attention from a boy, I'm happy it's over. The only one I remember with any fondness was the first one, because I liked him, and still do to this day. But we misunderstood each other. He was my school crush, and somewhat of a friend, but his lack of knowledge about me and my social awkwardness coming out to play killed it. Dead in the water, as they say. That's a problem that men have; pretending. All those boys, in the clubs, it's one they learn from, eventually, but every man has it at one point or another, and some it can take decades for them to learn.

I consider teenage relationships to be incredibly important part of life, a part I've failed - but so many have succeeded at - as it

forms a base of what a person desires in both a relationship and their lives. A life that has freedom; freedom to choose what they want, and when they want it. Even if that's the wrong guy! That's another thing, the ball game is so open that it is difficult to weed through the bad men and some women get stuck in the mud. Me, I'm going to wait for the perfect man... that's right, Jason Momoa. A real man. Anything can happen... right?

**“To be brave is to love someone unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. To just give. That takes courage, because we don't want to fall on our faces or leave ourselves open to hurt.”**

*Madonna*

# ANANYA

Age: 36

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: India

Man-woman relationships across regions, cultures and communities have probably been the most intriguing, most discussed, the most greatly misunderstood, and widely researched too. Every relationship comes with a few basic requisites; two individuals who are in the relationship, their individual or common cultural bearings and social conditioning, mutual trust and respect of each other, and mutual expectations of each other. In today's day and age of cross-cultural relationships, most of these factors vary and thus every relationship between a man and a woman is unique. However, being from India, I would like to focus on the typicalities of an Indian man-woman relationship here. Of course my deductions are based on general observations of several lives around me, and in no way meant to hurt the feelings and sentiments of any particular individual or family.

We Indians, I think, are still not completely free from the shackles of age-old notions of the stereotypical roles that men and women have played in a household for generations, no matter how educated and modern we have become. So, a man-woman relationship is considered to be successful when it culminates into the institution of marriage, which in the Indian context has largely been a patriarchal set-up. In a marriage, the wife not only commonly adopts the husband's family name, but more often than not is expected to live with the husband and his extended family of parents and other siblings and relatives, and treat his family as hers. The reverse, interestingly, is not in the least expected from the man. This is probably a prerogative of the man given that, in most cases he is the primary breadwinner of the family, and the wife gets to work only if she can juggle between her roles of a wife, a mother and then a professional, mostly in that order.

Even though there are more unit families today than before, the expectations from the wife or the daughter-in-law have not changed much. She is primarily the caregiver of the household, and deserves to keep her interest, financial freedom and happiness beneath that of the rest of the family. While the man is treated with honour and respect by the wife's parents, any show of affection to the lady by her husband is considered to be equivalent to the husband being henpecked or being under the 'influence' of the wife which, needless to mention, is considered sad and dishonourable. It is common and quite acceptable to suffer - in small or large proportions - maltreatment and abuse, as well as emotional or

physical torture, until the lady learns to adjust to the ways of the new family. It is glorious to be a dutiful son, to side by the parents during family feuds, but the reverse... unthinkable!

While a woman is expected to trust her man and leave her own family behind to live with him, with time she needs to earn his trust, so that all financial matters of the family can be disclosed, and she can be privy to financial investments and plans of the family - which is primarily the husband and his parents.

That is a brief overview of what most marriages in India still are, beneath the veil of modernization and liberation. There is no doubt that, with greater exposure and education, men do realize that their female counterparts are in no way inferior to them. However, a large percentage of Indian men still suffer from the social conditioning of generations, where a woman is considered the weaker sex who is vulnerable, and needs protection and bindings. They are still quite uncomfortable to deal with a woman who is fiercely independent and who does not conform to these set notions and expectations of the society. However, that is not to say that things are not changing. For every example of such a marriage-like shamble, there are several examples of marriages where the woman is treated with dignity and respect. But a complete change of sensibilities (that truly treat men and women as equal) across the society is yet to arrive, and we are all waiting with bated breath to see the light of such a day!

**“Love is not enough. It must be the foundation, the cornerstone - but not the complete structure. It is much too pliable, too yielding.”**

*Bette Davis*

# BRON

Age: 60

Nationality: Australian

Place of Residence: Australia

I've always liked men. From the first days at school and the earliest encounters, I found men robust, straightforward and fun-loving. After many years I've had to unlearn this because I discovered they could be fragile, complex and miserable. So my conclusion is that you cannot generalise about gender.

I am divorced with four grown up children from my long-term first marriage. I married again, but am now divorced.

Whenever we make statements based on a specific bit of experience with men, we just give facets. I wrote a book called *Parallel Universes* because, to help me process my feelings, I needed to put my experience of marriage to a man from another culture into words. I've been treated badly by some male individuals, but I take responsibility for that, because of the fact of my choices. What I am doing now is choosing wisely among men. That is perhaps my one piece of advice to my sisters; if you want to have a relationship with a man, *choose carefully*.

Women, let our focus be on creativity, on nurture, on laying down a new path, on making a difference - or whatever your calling is - and if a relationship with a man empowers you, or enables you to do better, then so be it. But we were not born to be slaves or chattels, we were never meant to be punching-bags or scape-goats. We are not simply decorations or sexual toys; women are human enhancement of a positive life. And that's what we want!

I look for intelligence and sensitivity in a man, I also want to see integrity and responsibility. I like good company, a person who likes to share their thoughts and feelings, maybe problems and goods. A good sense of humour is a great gift to bring to a relationship as well.

All that glitters is not gold. This can be true about men. They can seem chivalrous and strong, passionate and idealistic, or noble and generous, but the relationship may curdle if they are not suitable to your personality or disposition.

A man has got his physical urges tied up with his brain, whereas a woman separates love and sex when it suits her. If a woman feels the love is insufficient, she wants to stop the sex. The trouble comes when the man doesn't know how to send the right signals to show his love for the woman. Or if he doesn't love her anyway. That's when woman decided they are not happy with the terms of the relationship. They try to negotiate, with or without sex.

Our lives, as women, are not defined by men. Our success is not in terms of our service to them. In past centuries women mostly had lives circumscribed by a limit of career, or business and education opportunities, and in some countries this is still the case, but for those of us who have a chance to build a life of significance in our work or life mission, we should strive to do great things. That is what I'd like my epitaph to be: *She did great things.*

**“There's no changing your mind about whom you love. That's part of the tough thing about being in love - it's sort of undeniable.”**

*Piper Perabo*

# BEE

Age: 28

Nationality: Scottish

Place of Residence: Scotland

When we were kids, we used to run away from the boys when they came near us. They were dirty and smelly and just, ugh... they were boys. They picked their noses and flicked the boogies at you. They would play stupid games, throw bits of plastic spinning-tops at each other and nearly break their fingers playing conkers. They liked giving Indian burns and they fought each other on a whim. We were better than that, we were sophisticated. We played with our dolls, combing plastic through their hair, there was the dream house and the horse and carriage, and we used to change their clothes, putting them in the 'dresses we always wanted to wear.' We used to sneak into our mother's rooms and take out all her make-up from the bag and just lay it all out on the floor. We would look at the make-up and we would imagine sitting at the vanity table and dipping brushes into the powders and the shadows and colouring our faces, changing the reflection from that of an eager but plain girl into that of a beautiful and sophisticated woman. As girls, we didn't like boys but we wanted to be women and yet, as women, we would grow to want men.

When I was a teenager in the last year of my high-school education, I sat one day with my group of friends (all girls) and the conversation turned to boys. They always talked about boys and I really wasn't that interested, I was focusing on my future, on building a promising life for myself, studying for high-school exam results that would allow me to enter the hallowed halls of higher education. That day was different though. Where they would normally leave me to read my book while they prattled on about Liam MacPherson's hair or Scott Patterson's new motorbike, they instead interrupted my reading by asking me one simple question: "What do you look for in a guy?"

Well, I hadn't really thought too much about the subject, but when they asked me, I already had an answer. It must have been one of those things that had been lurking in my subconscious, and it was only when they asked that it really came out. I told them that the type of man I'd want would be someone mature, the sort of guy who would know me so well inside and out, that he'd be able to tell by a single glance at my face what was going through my mind. The type of man I'd want would be smart and funny, sophisticated and elegant to an extent. He would appreciate some of the finer things in life like literature and art. He would enjoy long walks in the autumn, our boots scuffing the ground and scattering the browning leaves.

At this point they all burst out laughing and shook their

heads. I was being unrealistic, they said. I needed to lower my expectations, they said. If I didn't then I would spend the rest of my life alone, they said. I asked them what they looked for in a guy and I wasn't exactly surprised by their responses, they wanted a strong man, a tall man, a man with a car, with a great hairstyle, a manly man. What they wanted was purely superficial and there wasn't really any substance behind what they were saying. I can't exactly say that they surprised me, but I was a little disappointed. These were beautiful girls on the cusp of becoming women and all they wanted was superficial vanity and material possessions. Yet, while I was sitting there listening to them, they were looking at me as if I was the space oddity, as if there was something wrong with me and my expectations. If the acceptable expectation was for a lower expectation - for style over substance so as to speak - then what was the state of the word I was living in? There had to be more than just that. I had to believe that I was right in my heart, that it really was substance over style.

I finished high-school and I went to university. It was the first real time that I found the boys looking at me and it was something I hadn't really anticipated. I'm going to be honest - I have to be - I was so easily taken in by them and their attentions. I had my rules though, I had a protocol in place. I would kiss and I wouldn't tell, I would kiss but that was all I would do, my virginity was sacred. Sex was sacred in a way, it was the closest I could be to another human being, an entirely spiritual experience.

University was a crash for me, it wasn't what I had really wanted at the time and I left. I could say I left a string of broken hearts behind me, but that would be stretching the truth farther than it could really be stretched. It was at this point that I met Him, the one. Don't misunderstand me when I say that He was the one, I thought he was the romantic one, I thought he was the love of my life. He looked at me in a way no one else had looked at me before and he ticked all my boxes. He seemed perceptive of my feelings, he encouraged me in my creative endeavours. We had walks through the woods and the fields, following the winding trail of the river. My world felt like sunshine warming my face and the gentlest of breezes stirring the leaves in the trees to sing and sing, reaching a rustling crescendo and my heart was light.

It was all a lie.

I was so desperate in my soul to find the right person, to prove everyone wrong and to prove that my expectations weren't unrealistic, that the sort of man I dreamed of was real. The problem with this is that I ignored everything else that didn't meet that expectation. To my error, I ignored the darkest parts of him and it was the darkest parts of him that made him 'the one.'

Intent loving looks had changed to something more sinister

and controlling. Where before he had encouraged me in my creative endeavours, he now did the opposite. Everything that I thought about him was wrong and I paid dearly for my mistake. The love that we had once shared had twisted into a cycle of abuse and I was desperate to be freed from it.

I fell into the trap that so many women and men have fallen into; in my pursuit to find the right person for me, I nearly lost my freedoms and my innocence was left in shreds and tatters. Perhaps my expectations were too high, perhaps the girls were right and I was the wrong one.

Perhaps...

Perhaps...

Perhaps...

I can tell you now that I was wrong again, but this time the error was truly a glorious one. You see, I then found the man who really did meet my expectations, the sort of man that I wanted to embrace me and keep me warm at night. He didn't have a car but he was strong and tall. He learned all he could about me, perceiving what was going on in my mind by a single glance at my face and in my eyes. He was smart in his own way, in his speciality, and he made me laugh so much that there were tears in my eyes and I was holding my ribs with one hand and reaching for my inhaler with the other. I met this man two-and-a-half years ago, and we are still together, preparing for our wedding. I look back now at the other girls and our conversation and I know in my gut that I was right to wait for this man. I was right to wait for 'the one,' the *real* one.

In my experience of love, I made a mistake at first, I got it so, so wrong but that's what happens in love isn't it? You make mistakes, you stumble a little and yes, you are probably going to fall but there will be someone to catch you and you never know, when they've caught you and you've looked up into their eyes with gratitude, you might just be looking into the face you've only ever seen in your dreams.

**“Love isn't a decision. It's a feeling. If we could decide who we loved, it would be much simpler, but much less magical.”**

*Trey Parker and Matt Stone*

# ZAHRA

Age: 23

Nationality: Sri Lankan

Place of Residence: Bahrain

*16 June, 2011*

Dear Diary,

Today I shall meet him. We will speak to each other, get to know each other and if we decide we like each other, we shall tell our parents that I am willing to accept his proposal. I certainly hope he is better looking than what his pictures on Facebook present. Even so, if he has got an amazing personality and is confident, intellectual, mature and all those things my parents say, then I probably should say yes, or I might be thought of as very, very foolish. In fact, it would be sensible to say yes, because it's the personality that counts. After all, I believe one can truly be happier and more in love with an average looking man who has got a beautiful soul than a beautiful man with an average soul.

*17 June, 2011*

Dear Diary,

Everything he has said to me is precisely what I seek in a husband. My parents could not have been more correct in finding the right man for me. He eats like I do, likes what I like, shares the same interests... It seems that we live very similar lives. I'm still not entirely sure, but I don't think I should disregard all these excellent qualities, simply because I have the nasty habit of nit-picking and over-thinking things. I believe I ought to say yes.

*20 June, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I'm not so sure anymore. I don't feel I'm very attracted to him. I have always wanted a good-looking man to be my husband, but is it too much to ask for someone who is good-looking and educated and witty and gentleman-like and fun-loving and adventurous, sensitive, sensible, intelligent and funny? Dear, dear diary. I am confused. I think I might ask a friend or two for some advice.

*02 July, 2011*

Dear Diary,

My friends believe him to be a 'golden opportunity' and the proposal to be something 'too good to be true!' They seem to think me so naïve for wanting more, and ridiculous for not understanding the value of what has been put before me. I wonder if they are right in thinking so, and judging me so forwardly. I cannot help but think that if I decide, as per their advice, and things go horribly wrong, it will be me who suffers, not them. Therefore, such a bold decision is easy for them to come to. I do not know if it is the fear of unsuccessful marriage that drives me away from the proposal, or simply the fact that I desire too much.

*13 July, 2011*

Dear Diary,

This is a big step for me. What if he is not for me? What if he is not as gentleman-like as he seems to be? What if he's telling me what I want to hear when we speak? I wonder if it is natural to lose so much sleep over it!

*25 July, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have spoken to my friends again. I have spoken to my sister and my parents. They seem to tell me I should accept the proposal because there simply is no reason not to, but my dear diary, they say it to me, without saying it to me. Perhaps I must tell them what I really feel.

*06 August, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I sat down to tell them how I feel but it proved too difficult a task. It did not play out like it did in my head. How was I to tell them that I was not attracted to him? Could I tell them I wanted someone more handsome, or someone more sophisticated, without leading them to believe I was proud, or desiring too much, or being unrealistic, or even worse - without leading them to judge me? Wouldn't they say: 'But you shouldn't be so picky,' or 'But think of all the good things,' or 'These things won't matter later in life!' Am I not deserving of the fairy-tale that every woman desires? Should I shut myself away from what I have, as a little girl, read in story books and force myself to deny me the right to a Prince Charming?

*19 August, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have come to a final decision! I have come to see that the stuff of story books and movies is not real and will never be. It is stuff that cannot be and therefore I must settle for what I have and avoid thinking in a labyrinth, because it would result in a convolution of thoughts within my head that would eat up my simplicity and produce pride. Does that make sense, diary? I have prayed and prayed and thus decided, believing that it is God's will and so is meant to be. I seek comfort in this belief, for I know then that if this is meant to succeed, it shall, and if it is meant to fail, it shall, but I will have God on my side so long as I am humble, good and unselfish, and do not wrong anyone.

*31 August, 2011*

Dear Diary,

August is at an end. Soon it will be September and the time will come for the wedding. Until then, we are to have conversations regularly. I cannot, however, fathom the reason for it, as I have already said yes and is it not too late now to say, no?

*10 September, 2011*

Dear Diary,

It appears that we have many things to disagree upon. Firstly, he denies having said he enjoys the same food as I do. It seems he enjoys what I most particularly try to avoid on my plate. Secondly, he does not seem to make any sense when it comes to principles, for he has asked me to do things, a certain way, but neglects to practice the same. Oh, my dear, dear diary, I wonder if that is grounds to terminate my engagement with him? I will have to sleep upon it.

*19 September, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have slept upon it. I have also talked about it. I have eventually concluded that I must not run away from this engagement that I have chosen to commit to, over matters that are quiet trivial. They say to me: 'He will grow up.' (which is a fascinating thing to say about a man who is already a couple of years older than me), and: 'He will be different once you start living together.' Dear diary, I wonder if he will though. Let us see what happens. For now, I think I am already in this too deep. I do not quite understand what it is he wants from me. I am aware of what I want from him and although I have made it quite clear, many times, his behaviour seems to indicate that he forgets it, or deliberately neglects it. Perhaps, we are just adjusting to each other. It will get better, I am sure.

*25 September, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have taken some time away from discussing the details of my engagement with anyone around me, in an attempt to decipher his feelings from his attitude and assess them with relevance to my own feelings and desires. Is it a whim, I wonder, for me to have desired the perfect man? For I now find myself adjusting and coping with all the flaws I find in him. I think - I believe - I may love him, but I am still unsure. Perhaps it is because he is too far away from me in our relationship for me to make a more stable judgement. I have thought long and hard about it. I have decided that the following are qualities I desire most in my husband. It is strange how, until I had a man in my life, in the place that I have let him into - that is an engagement that shall eventually become something called marriage - I was not aware of what really was important to me. It turns out, what I desired is farthest from what I found in the story books I read as a child. The need to be realistic outweighed the desire to be fairytaleish. He has to share the same values as me. This would require him to be very frank about his principles from the very beginning. He must have a desire to live life to the fullest and understand that it is equally important for a woman to have the same desire and act upon it. He must be aware that a woman is a person and I, as a woman, like to be appreciated for my intelligence, that is my mind and my soul, rather than my body. Dearest diary, am I asking for too much? It is just that, when I bring myself to discuss these requirements with him or anyone else, they look at me as though I had gone mad.

*01 October, 2011*

Dear Diary,

He refused to walk down the aisle with me. He was too concerned about what the women might say. I don't really understand his logic, for I thought him to be awfully friendly with his female friends. His argument was that he would be the only man in a hall filled with women, which I think is the most obvious thing to say, dearest diary, given that we would naturally have a segregated wedding! Foolish arguments. I really do not know why he did it!

*02 October, 2011*

Dear Diary,

The wedding did not go as I would have liked it to. Although I have long since given up the idea of a fairytale husband, I do not believe I have given up the idea of a fairytale wedding. Often my thoughts,

since the wedding ceremony came to an end, have led me to believe that there was only one thing that was not right at the ceremony. I regret - and I don't know why I regret it - but I regret to say that it might have been the husband, for if the husband is perfect, why should the wedding even matter. Is a wedding not completed by the bride and groom? Oh well! It was only the wedding. It is the marriage that counts.

*10 October, 2011*

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow, we are moving into our own apartment. It is going to be great. We shall have our own place, away from the meddlesomeness of our families. We shall eat food that we have cooked and watch movies that we have chosen. We shall spend our time, doing lovey dovey things like a real couple. From there, things will be so much better!

*20 October, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have not had the time to open you up and pour my heart into your pages in a while, although I have desperately wanted to. That is what this marriage has resulted in. All my plans have evaporated into the dust of our new apartment, and I was forced to sweep up what was left of my dreams as they settled upon the tiled floors. I found myself too busy cleaning to watch a movie with him. I found myself occupied with ensuring he had breakfast, lunch and dinner to eat, to enjoy cooking with him. I found myself too depressed with my state of affairs to do anything lovey-dovey at all. Had I known that marriage would be so, I might have put an end to it all much earlier. Is this what marriage is like?

*25 October, 2011*

Dear Diary,

He has been nosing into my things very often lately. He almost picked you up at one point and was about to look into your secret pages. Had he done so, he would have found out what was in my heart and I had a second to decide if it would be better for him to find out this way how utterly miserable I was, or just to remain in ignorance and know nothing, and believe that his life was perfect. I chose the latter for reasons I will never know or understand. I shall now tuck you away behind my clothes so he may never find you again!

*02 November, 2011*

Dear Diary,

This is not what I thought marriage would be like. It is not what I thought a relationship would be like. Is this what it's like to be so close to a man? He does not eat what I like to eat. He does not watch what I like to watch and he does not like to do what I like to do. We lead our lives together, me doing what he likes, but as separately as the bones that make up my rib cage, with a space in between them, that cannot be filled, as that would make it unnatural.

*14 November, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I had a large piece of cake today when he was not looking. He seemed exhausted as a consequence of what I cannot figure out, and so I encouraged him to sleep. When he did, I snuck into the kitchen refrigerator and cut myself a large slice of cake, serving it with an extra dollop of icing and a luxurious sprinkling of sprinkles. I consumed it greedily, as one who has been starved of sweetness would do so, with a large glass of cold, white, full-fat milk. Would you ask me why all the secrecy, dearest diary? It is only because the last time I had a piece of cake, he counted my calories. It is only because the last time I had a slice of pie, he commented on my weight. It is only because the last time I had a cup of full-fat yogurt, he read the calorie chart on the side of the cup. It is only because the last time I had one green grape, he said I have had one too many already! Why won't he love me as I am? Dear diary, it breaks my heart to know that he is unhappy with who I am and seeks to control me. And he is the one with greater flaws, this particular flaw being the greatest!

*26 November, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have been working all day, cooking and cleaning. Not what I thought I would do when I decided to be married. I thought he would cook with me and we would enjoy it. But when he does, he can take over so overpoweringly, it becomes nauseating and I begin to regret ever letting him walk into the kitchen. I have requested help around the house, but he will not give me any, for reasons I do not understand. I have thought about women who have had wonderful husbands who see to it that their every need is fulfilled. I envy these women with baby soft, un-worked hands, and smooth feet with heels that have not cracked from exposure to dust and too much soapy water from cleaning tiled floors. I envy the women who do not cook but eat and enjoy whatever they may desire, and still be loved and adored by their husbands, despite not having a coke-bottle body. I

envy the women who have husbands who ensure they have the time to do things that please them, be it painting, reading, swimming, dining, or whatever else it is that women like to engage themselves in. I envy the women who do not go to sleep very miserable every night, wishing they lived a different life and hoping to wake up to it, come sunrise.

*30 November, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I do not want to be working all day. I never wanted to be a housewife and nothing more. I do not think that was what he had in mind, although it is what he told me. Is it his desire to be in control of me? Is it his lack of understanding that women can and have the right to want more from life than sparkling floors and wonderful meals? Is it the idea of the traditional roles of men and women that society had implanted in his head that prevents him from giving me what I desire and taking only that which he longs for?

*08 December, 2011*

Dear Diary,

I have been cleaning obsessively in an attempt to run away from this wretched apartment. If I am to clean, I may as well make it more polished than it was the day before, because that was one of the many yesterdays of my life, yesterdays I am desperately trying to run away from. He does not understand it. It bothers him and I don't know why. It bothers him that I spend my time cleaning and washing dishes and attempting different recipes. Perhaps it is because I no longer want to waste time idling with him, doing whatever he likes to do. We are now as separate as the sky from the land, our meeting being an illusion and our points of contact changing with every step we take.

*08 January, 2012*

Dear Diary,

It's been a month since we last spoke. The situation has not improved at all. Sadly, I still have nothing good to write. He wishes too much to please his friends. He boasts of my education but speaks not of my talents. Shameful really, as with my education, there is nothing I can do as a housewife and with my talents, I can add a sparkle to my dull and monotonous life as a housewife. He laughs at their ridiculous jokes and wants to attend all their fancy parties. He wants me to befriend them and speak to them intelligibly. I do not care. Would he love me less if I did not laugh at their jokes? Would he

love me less if I had no education? Would he love me less if I did not please them and befriend them? Then, he does not love me and his love is ultimately what I have always wanted. But then, in not giving me his love, he does not have mine... What am I still doing here?

*20 January, 2012*

Dear Diary,

The new year began only twenty days ago! I had wished to make resolutions this year, but we both know there is only one thing I really desire and possibly be essentially and desperately in need of. As I cannot acquire it in marriage presently, and most likely never will, as the state of marital affairs I am currently in does not seem to get better and my understanding of my husband diminishes, while his understanding of me, if ever he attempted to have one, also withers away as rapidly as the stamens of the dandelion, I am enlightened of one thing, and that is that it is the relationship, or the match I may say, that is the real culprit. Alas! It is a big decision to make and one that society shall take absolute pleasure in frowning wickedly upon.

*20 February, 2012*

Dear Diary,

It has been a month since I have begun contemplating divorce. During the course of this month, I have come to realize further what it is I desire of a man I am committed to. In addition to those desires that I mentioned mid September of last year, I must add the following: he must love me for who I am, because if he does, I am prepared to love him for who he is. He must be willing to take care of me before himself, as I might be, if I was bold enough to love him. He must provide for me what I require and what is in his means - because that is what one naturally does when one loves another. He must understand the duties I have to myself as a human being - because that would indicate his appreciation and concern for my mental and psychological well-being. As to why he is unable to grasp these concepts, I cannot still understand.

*26 February, 2012*

Dear Diary,

Since we last spoke, I have thought about many things, one being the reason for his inability to understand what it is that I desire. I have concluded that the reasons for it might be many. Perhaps it is just because the women in his family do not desire the same things and have settled for quietly taking what is given, no fusses made and no questions asked. Perhaps it is because he is so full of himself and

has no consideration for the happiness of anyone but himself. Perhaps it is because he is too empty in the head to think it necessary to ponder upon the flaws of his relationships, and he therefore chooses to occupy himself and spend his time engaged in watching dramas, soap operas and movies that are either indecent or utterly pointless. I must admit, dear diary, that the last point I have made has affected me the most, for I have found that a man who might possess intelligence but lacks intellect is a man with no purposeful ambition and this not just bores me, but really does put me off. It is very unchallenging, mundane and dry. At the end, perhaps it is a mixture of all these things that prevents him from understanding me and, as much as I blame him, I have stumbled upon the wisdom that the fault is not his own but is really his upbringing.

*10 March, 2012*

Dear Diary,

Upon contemplation based on my previously recorded thoughts, I have vowed to raise my son to understand women and my daughter to understand men, should I have any. Simple it may sound, but the honest truth might just be that neither gender really will ever understand the other, but I believe the attempt to do so, can save many a marriage.

*24 March, 2012*

Dear Diary,

We have been fighting quite a bit and after a good and spiteful scolding that went both ways with no conclusion, he stormed out so very dramatically as if that would be his last and most magnificent exit, only to call me ten minutes later to invite me to accompany him to the beach. I complied because I needed the air, but I feel he thinks I agreed to accompany him because I sought to resolve the disagreement we have just had. Whatever it may be, I went and we talked. He seemed to be trying very hard to come to a resolution, but I was not falling for it again! The number of times we had both been in this situation in the past is too many to count on my fingers. If it was not the beach, it was the park. If not the park, the living room in dim light. If not the living room, the privacy of the car, and so it goes on. I was beginning to notice a pattern. We disagree. We quarrel. We dismiss. We try to make amends. He promises. He forgets. I try to forget. He moves on like nothing was wrong and no promises were made. I move on like I have made peace with it and do not wish to fuss over it any further. Of course, I never do expect him to keep his promises. Well, not anymore. So it was the same that occurred that day and when we arrived home, it was all forgotten, but I must

admit, not all forgiven.

*28 March, 2012*

Dear Diary,

My mind has decided for my heart, and my heart has obliged, as it has been desperate for too long. I am getting a divorce.

*01 April, 2012*

Dear Diary,

I have not yet broken the news to him but I do feel refreshed and exhilarated when I think that I do have a way out. I only have to wait a little bit longer until the time is right.

*08 April, 2012*

Dear Diary,

A few more days and this terrible ordeal that we have fancily termed 'marriage' will be over. I am ever-so thankful that I have been presented such a convenient escape at such a convenient time.

*14 April, 2012*

Dear Diary,

I am now on a flight back home. The freedom I feel is wonderful. It is as though I have been submerged and struggling for breath in a bucket of ice cold water, and have finally managed to escape from it for a breath of fresh air. He does not know yet, but he shall find out as soon as I am behind the close doors of my own home.

*16 April, 2012*

Dear Diary,

It has been twenty-four hours since I broke the news to him. He seemed to have seen it coming and so took it well for the first few seconds. After that, it was insult hurled after insult, and so I was forced to turn off my phone and disappear for a while.

*30 April, 2012*

Dear Diary,

It has been a terrible ordeal. There have been genuine tears and sympathy-seeking tears. There have been a genuine exchange of emotions and an insincere exchange of dialogue based on feigned emotions. There have been well deserving insults, as well as

undeserving and exaggerated insults shot from both sides. There have been a sharing of actual fears and desires, in a civil manner, and a sharing of fears and emotions aimed at provoking sympathy. It has been difficult and easy. It has been saddening and freeing. It has been everything good and everything bad, perhaps mostly in the eyes of prying society.

*02 May, 2012*

Dear Diary,

My night was an uneasy one. Sleep has been a wonderful escape, but because of that, I have slept too much and now have none left. In tossing and turning, I was forced to consider all that has happened. The good things haunt me, for now they have become meaningless, and the bad things torment me, for now they have become all the more meaningful. I often wonder if he loves me. I wonder if I ever loved him. These questions shall remain unanswered until eternity, I know.

*05 May, 2012*

Dear Diary,

I have had a long and final discussion with him. We spoke well. We reminisced well. We shared well. We laughed well and we cried well. It was but a wonderful conclusion to the unlucky match we made, the meaning-seeking vows we spoke, the crooked marriage we had, the fierce battling we did, and the false love we shared. One thing that most nags me as I ponder upon it now is when he said: "Imagine what people think now?" And, dearest diary, in those lines, laid the truth behind the relationship and the reason for it. The bold truth, although no one might say it, is that they married us for our place in society and we accepted them because of our place in society. The bolder and more hurtful truth then is that he resisted divorce, not because I meant something to him but because he knew that judgement would come from a cruel and mercilessly scrutinizing society and he was afraid of it! Alas! Just as I could not give him what he desired from our marriage, I have failed in giving him even that.

*16 May, 2012*

Dearest Diary,

It is over. At the end of it all, I have come to realize one very important aspect that has well reflected the man I was married to, and that is that he never did love me as a person but he may only have loved me for the wife he wanted me to be; young, educated, pretty and submissive. In being unable to grant him that one desire, I

have come to realize, about myself, that which has made me wiser. All along, I have desired a man that did not love me for what he wanted me to be, but one that loved me for what I was, what I could do and what made me who I am.

**“Life has taught us that love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction.”**

*Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

# AKANKSHA

Age: 17

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: India

Relationships are all about love. It took me a long time to realize that I'd spent most of my relationship history feeling not-so-great with either dubious partners, or guys who I failed to recognize as being decent. Looking back, I was actually downright miserable with some of my exes yet, at the time, I professed to be happy, or crazy about them, and that we just needed to 'work things out.' I also believed that being in a relationship meant that there was going to be drama and big lows. And then I got wise. That's not just saying the words 'I love you' and bandying around the L word each time you have a free moment, but committing emotionally, physically, and spiritually to the other person.

## **If there is age difference**

It's pretty common to date someone who is a few years younger, or older than you, and often the age difference is no big deal. Sometimes maturity level matches, even when ages doesn't. It is true that sometimes a significant age gap makes a relationship impossible, but age shouldn't dominate your relationship and should only be addressed when it's relevant. However, power plays a different role in these type of relationships; there may be a power difference between you, especially if you're at different stages in life (for example, one of you is in high-school and the other is working full-time). The older person may speak for the younger person, or take a bigger role in making decisions. The younger person may find it more difficult to voice their opinion, especially when it comes to their concerns about the relationship. Age isn't the only factor affecting power: gender, race and economic background can also play a role in relationship dynamics, and if we talk about sexual readiness, then a big part of feeling good about your sexuality is being able to explore it at your own pace. When there's a difference in age, the older person may have more experience and want to do things the younger person isn't ready for. The younger person may feel pressured to have sex or do other sexual activities, which is never OK, and some who date only much older people may be seeking a parental figure more than a romantic partner. They may be insecure about finances and, because of that, want to be with someone established in his career. If you have a history of dating people who are significantly younger than you, you may feel like your partner

admires your experience, or perhaps you're just not physically attracted to other people your age. A significant age difference doesn't necessarily mean there's anything wrong, but a long-standing pattern may be worth examining.

### **If you are in a long-distance relationship**

The thing about long-distance relationships is that they put an undue amount of stress on both parties, when maintaining a relationship can already be difficult. A relationship should not be a constant struggle; people need physical contact to create closeness and long-distance relationships take out the absolutely necessary physical aspect of a romantic relationship, and it is much easier to stray and be unfaithful. It's like intentionally agreeing to a dead bedroom. Don't let the long-distance horror stories scare you though, and take time to get to know the person before you pursue a relationship. The basis of any relationship is trust, and that goes double for long-distance - you have to trust that your partner isn't going to go behind your back and betray you, and they have to trust you to do the same. Long-distance relationships work like most other relationships, and can be very similar to 'no distance' ones. Every relationship is different. When it's real, and when you really feel something for another person, no matter how bad you are with dating... things tend to flow.

### **A man should fulfil her dreams**

Just because a woman has found the love of her life, doesn't mean all her dreams have come true. Everyone has secret hopes, dreams and longings for the future. Being in a relationship should not mean that you have to give up those dreams for your sweetheart's. On the contrary! Your man should be providing encouragement and support to live your dreams.

### **Write love notes**

I know, we're not in school anymore... but all the more reason that nobody would expect to open a small piece of paper with 'I miss you' or 'I love you' written on it. It's free, easy, and can be left anywhere to surprise him, or her. A sure-fire way to put a smile on their face and I know from experience how amazing it feels to have your significant other do something like this for you.

### **Listen**

In a healthy relationship, each partner relies on the other for love, guidance and advice. Sometimes, just taking the time to genuinely

listen to what they have to say, and not saying anything at all, will say more than your words ever could. Particularly for the guys; if a woman is complaining to you, remember that it means she trusts you enough to express her feelings to you. Don't betray that trust.

### **Do that thing he/she wants to do**

Whether it is watching a TV show your significant other enjoys, going to see the musical you're not really into, or trying that new restaurant with the cuisine you don't really care for, do it anyway (and have a good attitude about it). Relationships are about compromise, which means at times we do things we wouldn't normally do in order to make the person we care about happy. They will appreciate your effort and enjoy the experience even more because they get to share it with you.

### **Send a 'good morning' text**

A text that starts your partner's day on a good note doesn't just say 'good morning,' it says: 'You are the first person I thought of when I woke up this morning.'

### **Be reliable**

Do what you say you're going to do. Be reliable... Reliability? How boring. Reliability is the reason you buy a Toyota Corolla, not excitement. It's not glamorous or sexy or particularly interesting, but you know what? When you walk outside in the morning and turn the key you know that sucker is going to start up without a flinch, no matter how much it has been through. And same with a partner; you know they are going to be there for you when you need it, you know they are going to stand behind you when you need support, beside you when you need a teammate, and in front of you when you need protection. You don't have to wonder if they are going to do what they said they are going to do or if they are going to flake out on you last minute, because they are reliable.

### **Pay close attention and react accordingly**

In relationships, and in life, I believe many of us overlook the importance of thoughtfulness. Life moves quickly and we often get so wrapped up in our day-to-day routines that we lose sight of how important it is to work to make our significant other happy as well. This includes learning one another's likes and dislikes, supporting each other during difficult times, and encouraging each other during the good times. It includes paying attention to small details and doing

special things accordingly that we know each other will like. Being thoughtful helps us live, connect and love more deeply with others.

### **Why do couples separate?**

Long-term relationships require a ton of talking it out, and changing and growing because of these talks. If either or both parties are shut down to each other, this isn't going to happen and the relationship will crumble, and if you don't like any of the same things or have some similar interests, the chances are you won't have things to talk about before long. Money can also be a reason; if one person is too controlling with the finances, or one person spends everything, or you just have different view points about how money should be dealt with. Reasons why couples separate could be anything!

**“Age does not protect you from  
love. But love, to some extent,  
protects you from age.”**

*Jeanne Moreau*

# LISA

(not her real name)

Age: 61

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: Europe

I live somewhere in Europe. I'm an artist and my work is well-known, so is my real name, so I'm writing this under the name of Lisa; my family and friends would be shocked if they knew how my life has been.

What was it like to be in a relationship and to commit to another?

My first relationship ended with bitter tears shed over my very first lover. He was experienced in all areas of life, I was young and had none. I could keep house, look after children, cook food for a family and I thought this would be good enough. It wasn't. He wanted a sexual relationship, but it didn't seem right without being married. I finally gave in and allowed the liberties he wanted. I felt used and abused; making love was not like the magazines tell you - there were no crashing waves, no heavenly choir. Just a flat empty feeling. He was happy though and encouraged me to try again. I was left feeling empty.

He wanted a wife like his mum, someone who worked in a factory packing bed linen into boxes. I worked in a bank - I had done well at school, the last thing I wanted was to work in a factory. I was looking for promotion and ready to take my banking exams. My life began to change, he was taking over and I didn't see it. I loved him though, simple as that.

I remember my eighteenth birthday party. He arrived and gave me chocolates. In the middle of one of the chocolates was a ring. I put it on my right hand. He took it off and placed it on my left. Both our families, who were in on the plot, rushed in and congratulated us. We were engaged. He was manipulating my life. He was in control totally and I was a nice polite girl: I did not understand. He was so pleased but *I* was in shock! His control was amazing when I look back, marriage proposal never even discussed and suddenly there I was wearing his ring.

Events unfolded, wedding plans in the making. No one consulted me, he just presumed I was okay with everything. It was like some kind of fairground ride that never ended.

He and his father found us a house. His mother would sort me out a job at the linen factory. I didn't want to work in a factory! The thought horrified me. His family were planning the wedding and I just went along with things. I couldn't think for myself. I thought the engagement was for life.

Life continued and the wedding loomed closer. When all was about ready to proceed and the wedding was just a few weeks away, a good friend of his asked to see me. What he told me shocked me to the core; my controlling fiancé was having an affair with a married woman. At first I did not believe it, but then gradually realization dawned; we had been seeing less of each other. Surely he was working?

I challenged him and yes, he readily admitted it. He told me I was not experienced in sexual matters. Not enough for him. He wanted an experienced woman, someone who could blow his mind. I didn't understand. I was naïve. I thought marriage was about learning together, being faithful to each other.

He would not give her up and expected me to be happy with it. The house he had organized was close to where she lived, we were going to live in this triangle after the wedding. It was all sorted... as far as his controlling mind saw it. That weekend I woke up, and grew up. I got on the bus and came home. I was so ashamed.

I could not explain to anyone the cruel words he had said to me. I spoke to my dad and explained that my fiancé was having an affair. My dad was shocked. I took off the ring but couldn't speak. I couldn't tell my dad about the words said to me and how I felt. My dad gently took the ring and said he would sort out everything. I thought this was an end to it.

How wrong could I be?

My dad told him the wedding was off, the relationship was over and gave him back the ring. He was angry; my dad had taken away his control over me. I thought I was safe now, and could begin my life again. Then it began. The phone calls started, over and over he would ring my family. I was his and no one else could speak to me. Then the threats started; I was his and no one else could have me. I was becoming frightened.

Then he appeared at work. He was stalking me. I'd look out of the window of the office there he would be. I'd escape down the fire exit, he became wise to that and would wait at the bottom. I was a nervous wreck. He wanted his possession back. He wanted his puppet back. I refused to speak to him, I just wanted all of this to go away. My colleagues were concerned for me. Then he started following me home, always at a distance.

I finally told my dad. He knew a friend at the court and a court order for 'no access' was granted; he was not to come anywhere near me. He stayed away from the house, however he kept appearing close to work. When we were together he had an old car but now suddenly he had a shiny new sports car. My friends described him to me; new clothes, short hair, contact lenses. Wow, what an impression he was trying to make. He tried everything to get me back into to his life and to regain his control. Finally, after months of

continued harassment, he just gave up. His father contacted me several times saying I had ruined his son's life, and that I was unsuitable marriage material for his son, or anyone else for that matter. I was not woman enough for his son! However, he said, I had been good for his son to practice with! My friend had to explain to me what this meant - that I was not good enough in bed.

Again, his control continued over my life and I became quiet and withdrawn.

A little later I met someone else, a man much older than myself. A naval officer. Smart, attractive, worldly-wise. He had had relationships but nothing long-lasting. He was open and frank about his past. I explained I had been engaged. He wanted a pure girl. A virgin. He was not pleased when I admitted that I had given away my virginity. We didn't speak for a while and he went away to sea. Again, I was ashamed now that no man would want me. I was saddened that my former fiancé still had this control over my life, and I was not pure!

A few months later he contacted me and we began to see each other. He accepted my past. I was twenty years-old. He was twenty-nine, almost thirty. It did not seem much of an age gap, but it was - we were generations apart. I was pleased when he came to see me, he looked great in his officer's uniform. Love began to slowly blossom between us. Then came the time when we decided to make love. I was nervous and unable to relax. It was a bit of a disaster. I thought he would be angry but he wasn't. He was patient and kind. We waited till his next leave and he wanted to try again. With time and patience, I was able to relax and all went well. He awoke in me a passion, which shocked me!

We married I was all starry-eyed and in love. By then he was out of the navy and working as a college lecturer. I didn't quite understand and thought that our marriage was going to be loving and kind. Marriage was till death do us part but I was wearing rose-coloured glasses. As I was awakening sexually he was slowing down. So that was it. He used this against me, saying cruel words and that no one could satisfy me. I was too much. I crept back into my shell again and becoming withdrawn and anxious. He then decided when we made love, maybe once every couple of months. It became a taboo subject, and yet I was expected to be a good wife; quiet, docile, with no desire to make love, and totally without opinions of my own. He wanted me to dress in the clothes he liked. Sombre colours; browns and beige. Nothing bright, nothing revealing. I was again in the control of another man. But I couldn't see it; he was a good man and I loved him.

Friends spoke to me about how quiet I was. My dad said about how I had lost my sparkle. After ten years of marriage I was pregnant - amazing after being told I couldn't have children. I found

out I was pregnant when I was six months into the pregnancy. I was completely in shock and told no one, only my doctor knew. I was surprised, but kind of pleased. However, I was very cautious about telling my husband. Eventually I plucked up courage to tell him. He was so angry. This was not what he wanted. How had this happened? Now he was trapped! I was heart-broken. He insisted on a private doctor's appointment to see if there was anything which could be but my doctor explained that I was around six months, way too late to consider a termination... if that was on his mind? He was furious. The doctor was very angry and said that he needed to grow up and accept that he was going to be a father.

The age that divide between us became wider and wider. His mother who by now was in her late 70s was not impressed that we were going to have a child. As far as she was concerned, I was a gold-digger, only after his money. What money? Things did not improve between us and physical contact became non-existent. I had the baby, a little girl, and he was slightly pleased. She was beautiful until she cried! That was it he did not want anything to do with her at all. Suddenly this baby - our baby - was my baby. If she cried he referred to her as 'it'. Take 'it' outside. Take 'it' away from me. She was not a peaceful baby, and he was an angry father. He definitely expected children to be seen and never heard. One night he wanted to make love. Great, I was delighted. However, the baby cried and he was furious that I had to choose between this baby and him. I tried to rock the carry-cot with one foot as we had sex.

Our lives changed when a new opportunity presented itself; my husband was offered a job in Africa as a university lecturer. We went to Africa when our baby was six months old and he saw less and less of her. When our daughter was four we had another child. This time a son. This baby was loved and besotted over by my husband, while his daughter was just pushed from view. The children and I came back to England, while he worked away, coming home whenever he could. I was left with two little ones to bring up. Life continued without much love in it. I loved him - he was my husband, but I doubted whether he loved me. We moved abroad again and suddenly things changed: he asked for my forgiveness and said he was truly sorry about how he had treated me all these years. Please would I forgive him. Of course I would. I loved him. We became more loving as a couple, and occasionally would make love. The next fifteen years were the best of our thirty-five year marriage. Age softened him. He became more caring and considerate. He began to listen - on occasion - to my opinion and became less controlling about what I wore. He actually encouraged me to learn new skills and to continue my career as a teacher. I was devastated when he died.

My second and current husband can be kind and loving, funny and interesting. Charming to everyone he meets, until someone says

something he doesn't agree with. Then he does a number - he shouts, rants, rages. He wants a wife who does as she is told without discussion or an opinion. If I have an opinion he becomes very angry. If anything is out of place, he rants and rages. He can be a manipulative, spoilt, controlling, bully. Apparently, these are the exact words his first wife used when she divorced him. He told me this. I was charmed by him and in love. He works away and I walk around on eggshells very carefully when he is here.

My experience has taught me this: the three men I have known want a quiet, docile wife who looks after the house and cleans up after them, washes their clothes etc. A wife who can cook simple food and cordon bleu as the need arises. I can do both. Entertains guests and makes a mean gin and tonic. Another box ticked. Does not answer back and keeps her opinions to herself and does as she is told! When asked a question, she responds with the correct answer in an intelligent manner, and is available for meaningful discussions about the state of the world, should he feel like discussing state of said world. A wife who is totally supportive of his work and assorted pressures relating to this, does not make demands on his time in any way shape or form, and when occasion demands, is available for sex. A wife who accepts her lot, as it were, without complaint and does not bother him with trivia about her life at home - her life is being happy that she is loved, supported and provided for.

I've been married for five years. However, I'm doing my best to see things from a place of love and not fear. But I have changed; Miss docile is coming out of her corner. He won't like it but you know what, I really don't care! I'm not that docile woman anymore!

**“A successful marriage requires  
falling in love many times, always  
with the same person.”**

*Mignon McLaughlin*

# ALEA

Age: 28

Nationality: Bahraini

Place of Residence: Bahrain

Since birth we are conditioned that women are second to men and that men are superior. We, the secondary ones, are brought up to believe that, since the human creation, our superiors are the more capable, the more powerful, the more 'knowing' of all species. We grow and grow, watching and learning through everything, from old literature and the amazing examples of men in fictional form. We then close our books and turn on the television to watch more examples of men saving the world from all kinds of danger. We then turn that off and look at the more closer, personal representations of what men should be; we look to our fathers - men that raised us - and we look to our brothers, friends, uncles and cousins as more examples of what men should, and shouldn't, be. We are then sent out into the world... but here men are unrecognisable, there are no such heroes, not many grand gestures of the fictional world we were raised to believe in. Men in the real world have no super-powers, nor any extraordinary signs of being what they are, as the first humans upon this earth. And then we are asked the question: what do women want?

Women want the men of this world to man up! Yes, most women I know are tired of doing all the manning! The male race is close to extinction due to men alone, for they irritate us to the core, what women are fixated on is dreams of men that do not, or have never existed.

We are angry because of the lies we believed; that *he* would be understanding, that *he* would listen, that *he* would remember my birthday, that *he* would be there when the kids ask for him, that *he* would take care of us, that *he* would always be there.

Those are precisely the lies we have believed, and continue believing. Here lies the source of our anger; that the lies were better than the truth we live with now.

**“In art as in love, instinct is  
enough.”**

*Anatole France*

# JENNIE

Age: 28

Nationality: American

Place of Residence: USA

I can't speak for all women, as I've learned we all speak the language of love differently. The way I love has evolved, but the basics are always there. As a woman, I think that we require three things on a daily basis: affection, appreciation and attention. Love is a very precious gift, and you're not always going to be on cloud nine, but that doesn't mean you can't keep the flame alive as much as possible. I want to know that a guy wants me, that he is interested and engaged. I want his actions to meet his words. I want a man that treats me like I'm the only one, I get the privileges that others do not, and that he is completely and unconditionally with me. Of course, I would provide this in return, in addition to anything I expect.

I appreciate old-fashioned chivalry and courting. Some people don't like to be bombarded by attention, but I can never get enough of it. I like to talk and text and chat as much as possible, or as much as time will allow. I want to feel comfortable contacting that person at any time, for anything. Little reminders he is thinking of me go a long way, like a text saying I miss you, or I love you, or have a great day, even a good morning or good night text or chat. Some people don't believe in having a one true love, but the kind of love I crave is that I find one person who touches me like no other and we are bonded for life and grow old together. I find it attractive when a man claims his woman. When he finds a rare woman who is independent and caring and strong, he should want to make her his own, not in a possessive way, but if he deserves her and she deserves him, it is a win-win. I like it when a man declares his love and is not afraid to show it to the world. I find that most men don't take the time to really get to know a woman, find out what she likes and how SHE wants to be loved. Mind you, women need to do this too, because a loving relationship is all about balance, but there are some gender role expectations. The best and easiest way to do this is to ask, but also do things that you know anyone would appreciate. Make sure her needs are met, that she knows you care for her and will protect her and fight for her. Never miss an opportunity to hold hands or put your arm around her, or kiss her neck softly. Men should make Valentine's Day and anniversaries and birthdays very special, as these are memories for life, and to me it's more about sentiment than gifts. It is so sexy to get lost in the moment and in the affection and really BE there. People need to give each other their undivided attention. Again, we

all love differently and I find that it feels right with someone when they speak our love language naturally. We all express love in different ways, not just by saying it, because some people say it but don't show it, or their actions don't reflect this love.

The best advice I can give to a guy is to learn his woman. Be passionate and emotional, make her a priority and treat her like he would want a man to treat his own daughter. Every day we need to treat love as a gift and not take it for granted. Every day wake up and greet one another and be grateful for the presence in each others' lives. Do loving deeds for each other and be sweet! Don't just give short hugs and peck, but hug long and kiss deeply. The best way to keep the flame going is to constantly flirt and date one another. Often times when couples are together for years and years, they grow apart instead of growing together. They develop and mature differently, and life pulls them away and they get complacent. Intimacy is a huge factor as I believe when you are attracted to someone, that is what keeps a relationship ripe. If a person continually does things that make me attracted to them, then you always fight for the relationship and want to stay. When people do unattractive things or treat us poorly or make us feel neglected by not expressing love, then that is where relationships fail. In school we are not taught how to love or how to be an ideal partner. We learn by what we see or how others treat us. To be a good lover, you have to want to be a good lover. You have to have a profound understanding of what it means to truly love someone and devote oneself.

As a woman, I hold myself to high standards and so I hold similar standards to a potential lover, as they are an extension of me. I prefer someone who is physically attractive and fit because this tells me they take care of themselves and their health. I think intelligence is sexy, and so is someone who is educated and has common sense. I think having a sense of humour is important, knowing when to be serious, but also when to laugh and have fun. I like it when a guy takes control, makes plans, initiates dates, and totally knocks me off my feet. There are many mediocre things in life and love should not be one of them. I want to be able to feel like a lucky girl and that I have the best guy in the world. I like it when a guy tells me how he feels about me, or how he feels in general. I find it very attractive to have a guy that does it all and who has his act together. It's not just the lovey-dovey things in a relationship, but also the qualities a person must have in order to function in life. For example, being smart with finances will prevent a lot of arguments, as literature has stated most people divorce because of money issues. It is important to have a career and manage time and priorities well.

All in all, the best advice I can give to men is to be real, be serious, and take initiative. Treat your woman like a queen and she will want to treat you like a king. Do everything together as a loving

team and cherish love every day. Express gratitude and give the girl lots of affection and attention. Be chivalrous, hold doors, pull out chairs, hold hands and make her know you want her and she is your one and only. From the very beginning find out as much about her as you can and find out what she likes and how she likes to be treated - you'll get a different answer from every girl. Spend quality time together and really get to know each other. The one problem with anyone is when they think they know it all, they will never learn, so always been willing to learn!

Oh, another last piece of advice for men is to not be afraid of rejection. If you like a girl, just ask her out. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Don't sell yourself short either, just be confident and realistic, take a shot and risk it, because it may very well be the best decision you'll ever make.

**“Love is everything it's cracked up  
to be... It really is worth fighting  
for, being brave for, risking  
everything for.”**

*Erica Jong*

# TRACEY

Age: 50

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

*Once upon a time there was a little girl called Tracey who dreamt that one day she would meet and marry her Prince Charming and live happily ever after. She is now a middle-aged woman, older and much wiser, yet no closer to meeting her Prince, but still lives in the hope that one day she will find true love.*

I'm forever the optimist, but I'm also a realist; the chances now of finding my one true love for whom I'll be their soulmate, friend and lover is highly unlikely. I'm not a betting person, unlike my recent ex (that's another story!), but anyway, let's look at the odds based on my story so far.

I can remember my first experience of... shall we say... believing I was in love, because I now know it was nothing more than a crush, despite at the time feeling like I would never recover from my broken heart.

I was thirteen and utterly besotted with the vicar's son at my local church, so much so I even joined the choir. My parents had previously struggled to get me to church, but now I had every reason to want to go as - in my very young eyes anyway - my future husband was there! I would love feeling the butterflies in my stomach as I watched him magnificently carrying the cross leading the choir down the aisle. He was fourteen - the older man - tall, handsome and with blonde curls, and I loved him. So you can imagine the devastation I felt one day on learning that he had asked one of the other girls in the choir out on a date to the cinema. Worse still, she was in my year at school. Suddenly I made it my mission to hate that poor girl forever, as she had caused me so much pain, never mind the fact that he had chosen her over me. He was blameless because of course she had bewitched him in some mysterious way. My parents were back struggling to get me to attend church, and I took to wearing black as if in a period of mourning for the loss of my heart.

Fast forward a couple of years to age sixteen; more confident, self-assured and, as far as I was concerned, a woman of the world. I'd had a few very short-term boyfriends, the odd fumble behind the bike shed and at college parties, but I was still a virgin (unlike many of my friends). Then, whilst at a caravan rally with my parents, it happened; I first experienced lust. At eighteen, he was older than me, tall, handsome with blonde hair, the son of a rally marshal, and spinning the records at the caravan club disco that night, glammed

up to the nines and dancing provocatively in front of the disco lights. I managed to catch his attention. He had his own car and he took me out for a drink a couple of times, all very sophisticated, or so I thought. The third time we met it was to go back to his house, as his parents were away for the weekend, and we did the deed (I'll spare you the details). My first time experience wasn't great and it certainly didn't live up to the big romantic scenario I had imagined so many times in my head. I was virtually inconsolable when a week later he unceremoniously dumped me for a girl his own age. I had now managed to convince myself at the tender age of sixteen, that fairytale love didn't really exist after all, and movie type love affairs where an unobtainable dream.

Nearly three years followed of what could only be described as heavy petting with boys in various nightclubs in my home city. The occasional date might follow as a result of one of those petting sessions, but nothing very meaningful and certainly nothing lasting, and so my friends finally decided it was time for me to grow up and to look for my Mr. Right, so they signed me up to the Lonely Hearts page in our local free paper - the bygone equivalent of today's online dating. It was painfully time consuming, and I had to wait days to see if I had generated any interest in my advert. Finally the day arrived to pay my post box a visit and, to my amazement, it was full. No simple swiping rights and lefts back then! I took my time in reading each reply and perusing the included passport size photos. Then I saw him, my future husband; nineteen, tall, dark haired and very handsome.

We dated and I enjoyed his company; I felt safe and, for the first time, I felt cared for. It wasn't love and it wasn't lust, but in my mind at that time it was enough for me, and we married three years later.

After we had our two lovely sons it seemed that his duty had been done and the physical side of our relationship became virtually non-existent. I would listen to my friends complaining about their husbands persistent sexual advances and wondering why my husband never wanted me. All I wanted, at that particular time, was to feel like a desirable woman. I wasn't even bothered if he loved me or not. I tried everything I could to ignite some kind of spark; I acquired a dress-up wardrobe and would set up romantic and sexy scenarios, but to no avail. After continuous rejections, and before my self-esteem hit an all time low, I suggested relationship counselling, to which he surprisingly agreed.

My husband had always had a turbulent relationship with his mother and it eventually came to light at counselling that he saw me as her substitute. Well there I had it; he would only ever be able to love me as a mother figure and nothing more.

As the years past our relationship slowly but surely began to

fall apart; our sons were the only thing that glued us together. There was no emotional, and certainly no physical connection, and my husband became a very bitter and resentful man. Previously he had only ever vented his anger verbally towards myself and the boys, but he was now becoming physically abusive with our oldest son, and so enough was enough. After twenty-two years of enduring a mostly loveless and sexless marriage, I finally ended it and was ready to embark on a new journey in my search for love.

After a period of coming to terms with the end of marriage, my very well-meaning friends suggesting it was time I got myself back out there again and so there I was, at forty-two, looking for love again. However, this time I was thrown into what seemed like shark infested waters of online dating. With my naïvety, it took me quite a while to understand and digest the complex code of ticking the appropriate box as on some dating websites, ticking the box '*Looking to date but nothing serious*' - which I thought meant lets go for a drink and see if it leads to another date - actually meant something completely different! After a short while and some good and... well, not so good dates, I changed my preferences to: '*Looking for a relationship.*' Suddenly my inbox wasn't quite so full, but I was however, receiving messages from men who genuinely wanted to date me and see if things would then develop into something more serious and lasting.

I was now about to enter into my first proper relationship since my marriage ended with one man who particularly stood out. He was nice enough, only a couple years older than myself, tall and good-looking. We shared a lot of interests and we were so compatible on many levels. At first our love life seemed fantastic, and more than made up for what had been lacking in my marriage; this man couldn't get enough of me and we would have sex on an almost daily basis, and always more than once. However, as any kind of contact would inevitably have to lead to sex. after a while I missed just having a cuddle, snuggling on the sofa with the occasional little affectionate kiss. OK, so I should have felt like a desirable woman, which is what I had longed for within my marriage, but instead I felt like a sex object. He said he loved me, but was it me he loved or the fact he loved sex with me? I could never tell, as he never actually 'made love' to me, it was just sex, and yes, there is a difference! In the end it felt like he was purely living out his sexual fantasies through me - I could have been anybody. I wasn't happy, however, that said, generally we got on well and we did have some enjoyable times together and I thought that in time I could be happy and convinced myself things would improve. But it actually came to an abrupt end when I suggested that maybe we should take the next step and think about living together? Not a man to sugar coat anything, he replied he would never live with me. Such harsh and hurtful words for me to

hear. Later he explained it wasn't me personally, it was that he didn't really want to live with anybody - he was happy on his own.

At the time I thought cohabitation was what I wanted but, on reflection, I think it was more what was expected of us, the natural progression of our relationship. The rejection wounded me deeply though, my self-esteem was at an all time low, and my state of mind at the time wasn't great and I should have allowed myself time to totally heal but after a few months I thought I was fine and ready to date again.

At forty-six I still longed to have that one special person for whom I was their everything. Like I've said previously; I'm forever the optimist, so I got myself back online and started my search for my Mr. Right. I created my new profile and, so as to weed out the undesirable time-wasters, I particularly stated I was only looking for a long-term relationship. After only a couple of days online I was already feeling disillusioned and disappointed and my finger was poised and ready to press the '*delete my profile button*,' when I then saw him! Handsome and distinguished looking, with grey hair - a real silver fox - and he had messaged *me*! I already felt special.

We exchanged several messages and we really seemed to have a special connection. It was only three days later that we arranged to meet up, but I was so excited at the prospect that it seemed like forever. What happened next I can only describe as a once in a lifetime experience and, until it happened to me, I had never believed it. He stepped out of his car and, in the words of Billy Ocean: '*Into my heart.*'

He was more handsome than his photo; tall, dressed smartly and smelt great. We sat into the early hours chatting over coffee, all the time I was hoping that he was feeling the same intensity of emotions as I was. I was experiencing love at first sight, and I wanted - and needed - him to be experiencing the same and I couldn't believe my luck when he expressed the same depth of feelings he had towards me. Within five weeks he had moved in with me and we were making plans for our future together. Within five months we had moved to a different area and he had proposed to me. Looking back though, the warning signs were there, but I was absolutely besotted and refused to acknowledge what had become so obvious to those around me; that the man I had fallen in love with and planned to marry had a serious drink problem, as well as other deep-rooted issues. And so, as a result, our relationship suffered the consequences. Alcoholics, by the nature of their addiction, are deceitful which isn't conducive to a happy and healthy relationship; emotionally, financially or physically. I kept hoping things would get better, that he would get better - after all he had an illness - but it never happened. He wasn't ever violent towards me, but the emotional stress I was under felt like a real physical pain and one

day, after yet another drunken outburst, I decided enough was enough; he had left the house announcing for the umpteenth time that he no longer wanted to be with me, however, this time on his return I announced that I no longer wanted to be with him. I had given up fighting to save our relationship. Battle weary, I truly felt I had been sold the dream but he hadn't allowed me to read the small print.

So much for love at first sight.

OK, so where am I at now? And what is it I really want from a relationship?

I'm fifty now and I'm no longer that little girl dreaming of meeting her Prince Charming, her one true love. But yes, I'm still hoping to meet my soulmate, friend and lover, but with whom I can have a *mutually* respectful relationship. Is that really so much to ask for? It's so easy to say 'I love you' as part of habitual behaviour and not really mean it. It's so easy for someone to say 'I love you,' to excuse their hurtful and abusive behaviour. Respect on the other hand has to be gained, and gained firstly for oneself in order to then be able to receive it from another. I don't believe men get it wrong, and I know I have to be responsible for setting my own benchmark. I have to know what *I* actually want first before I can expect any man to get it right.

**“Love is the irresistible desire to  
be irresistibly desired.”**

*Robert Frost*

# ANITA

Age: 35

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

I grew up reading Jane Austen books and there is no better portrayal of a woman's mind as in Austen's stories. The characters are strong, wily, weak and manipulative; essentially being women. Though Austen writes about times and practices that are not relevant in today's context, the behaviour of women in certain familiar situations still remains the same. Being a woman, I catch myself repeating what most women would do under similar circumstances, especially when it comes to dealing with men. Contrary to the popular belief that women do not know what they want, I have a few viewpoints to share.

## **We want everything that men want, but at a different time.**

My friend G is actively looking to settle down. Like Lana Del Ray crooned for the *Great Gatsby* soundtrack, G had seen the world, done it all and had her cake now. Finally, she found a suitor in someone who looked accomplished and available. We were all excited for her as she made plans of where she would like her wedding to be. A few weeks down the line I met her again and asked her about what was going on with her handsome suitor, and G sadly explained that both of them were in different places in life and wanted different things. This mismatch of timing is such a pain. I felt G's pain. I put away my imaginary bridesmaid dress for another time when G would be back with a more promising suitor.

## **Women definitely know what they want but do not express it much.**

Austen wrote in *Pride and Prejudice*: "A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment." Women's minds are fertile with expectations. Mostly unspoken and unexpressed, and this is where all the trouble lies. We wish we expressed more, but then that would make us more like men who speak their minds all the time, whether we like it or not.

September 2004, I decided to break up with my boyfriend of five years to whom I was engaged to for two years. It shocked my friends, my relatives and his relatives... except my mother. To show their support to him, our common friends stopped talking to me, but I

did not care and did not bother justifying; it was my life and I could choose to do what was good for me. My parents supported me wholeheartedly, because there are some core values with which I was brought up and being in that relationship for five years made me realize that I had to compromise with my core values, such as integrity and freedom to 'be.' I could not fathom a life-time of enduring this compromise, and so I decided to move away. But what made me stay for five years despite this revelation that happened early on in the relationship? I was giving love a chance. People say love conquers all, but unfortunately in certain cases it is not enough. People reading this would say I should have spoken up and told him how I felt. Of course I did, but somehow I concluded that my boyfriend had an idea of what an ideal partner should be like, and tried to fit me into that. I tried to comply and realized I would never fit perfectly. This made everything so uncomfortable and I made up my mind to move on.

### **Growing up and maturing allows women to figure what they really want.**

Fast forward to the present where I am writing this essay on the challenges of finding love and what women *really* want, I turn to my team members in my firm. These are all young, educated and single women in their early 20s. The moment I posed this question, they burst out in a fit of giggles. I was quite taken aback by this reaction. To me, what we women want is a very pertinent question. Why aren't these lovely, educated women taking this question seriously? After much thinking, I realized it was an age related issue. In my 20s I was never sure about what I wanted, like any young person to whom the world looks like a sea of possibilities. The matter of what to expect from relationship, and from the man of the moment, was not very crucial. Setting expectations right was never on the agenda. My foolhardy behaviour resulted in plenty of heartbreaks, and I am not talking about mine alone. But now when I look back, I feel there are many things I would say to my younger self. Growing older and more experienced has made me more confident of my choices, and I have more clarity in terms of what it means to set expectations right in a relationship. But do the men get it right with experience?

### **Even the most mature men get it wrong.**

Growing up, I saw my parents talking to each other a lot, sometimes even forgetting that my brother and I were in the room; they were so engrossed in each other talking about their day and other trivialities. To my mind, it felt like they understood each other unusually well. Yet, several times I found my mother desolate. It was shocking to

observe that even my father, who I thought to be unendingly generous and broad-minded, happened to miss the mark at times. Were her expectations so out of line? I don't think I will ever find out, because both of them are so guarded about their relationship and its caveats.

### **Make amends for those lost second chances before it is too late.**

In 2001, my friend and her boyfriend of eight years split. They were childhood sweethearts. It was a shock for all of us, but my friend was simply unresponsive. Her boyfriend was frantic and kept in touch with us to figure out what went wrong. Despite several pleas of second chances, she refused to budge. The only thing she said was: "He lost his second chances so many years ago." The boyfriend got it wrong so many times and she put up with it for the sake of their love and attachment. But then enough was enough and she was ready to move on.

### **Never ignore the small things.**

So it all comes down to why do these sad incidents happen, where couples of many years break up, and love that was so strong dwindles and perishes? Every individual enters a relationship with their idea of loving a person and a set of expectations. Both the partners want to love and be loved and cared for. These are the larger set of expectations which have to be met instantly and without which the relationship would cease to exist instantly. My dad always told me not to fret over the small stuff, but then that is what makes us women. The small stuff that doesn't get acknowledged is what piles up and becomes a huge mountain of unmet expectations. Women do not raise these issues thinking they can ignore it while they can, which then leads to an accumulation of these tiny incidents that keep bubbling until they are ready to tip over, rocking the vessel. Men who are smart enough to notice the signs can prevent this explosion of the volcano, while the less fortunate ones are destined to burn and die.

### **What do women look for men?**

The answer to this question changes as we women get older and start to know better. My younger self would have answered without hesitation; tall, dark and handsome with bucket loads of money. But an older and wiser me would say I need someone who is intelligent and sensitive to my needs. My friend G said she would stay ten thousand miles away from the type who looked anything like a

playboy. She wants someone stable and kind. She was particular about expressing that her partner should have an aspirational value to him, which means that he should be either more powerful, more intelligent or more stable compared to her, and someone who she can look up to. It feels ironical when empowered women like G say this; why wouldn't they want a relationship of equals? We women are contradictory creatures like that. In this modern era, where we have feminist movements going strong for us and opportunities to show our potential are aplenty, we still hope to be picked as a partner rather than try and approach the man we like. The most powerful of women step down from their high seats when they reach the home turf where they want to be held and loved and cared for. In a relationship, our instincts as women reduce to a primal level which all the education, power and the riches in the world can't shake. We want to feel secure physically, emotionally and financially, and want a man who can provide us all three, even though we may not need it. Oscar Wilde put it beautifully: *'I see when men love women. They give them but a little of their lives. But women when they love give everything.'* That is what all women want - a man to who they can give all their love.

**“True love allows each person to follow his or her own path, aware that doing so can never drive them apart.”**

*Paulo Coelho*

# UZMA

Age: 38

Nationality: Pakistani

Place of Residence: Pakistan

The confounding age-old question of what women *really* want is a tricky one and hard to answer in one word or a sentence. It is a bit like describing an unusual choice of colour, like the subtlest difference between shades of white or nailing a 'cocoa-pink' with just enough hint of cocoa to keep the pink from being too bubble-gummy pink. Let's just take the bull by the horn and own up to being complex beings.

For most part I think men have a fairly straightforward way of operating, and their approach to life is very boxed-up and black or white: Yes/No. Women, on the other hand, have complex thought processes and a life perception well over fifty shades of grey, and everything ideally multiple-choice please! Women are just wired that way, and it's a good thing too, for they are the ones who face the challenges of motherhood and it is often their innate intuitive sense that usually saves the day, and in relationships they're the ones who deliver the missing burst of colour, and give meaning to the otherwise insipid lives (of men). However, it appears that the deeper reasoning behind the complexity is lost on most men. Make us straightforward and as plain as black 'n white, and you may as well get yourself a bonny pet rock.

There may be tips, pointers, guides and experiences to learn from, but truth be told, there is no sure-shot formula or instructions that will cater to all women, all men, or all situations. It varies in its ebb and flow with every individual. At best, know that all the rules are set aside for the right person and for the right reasons.

But, for discussion's sake, I'd say that what women *really* want is to be loved, pampered, empowered, respected, understood and heard. Loved but not smothered, pampered but not regarded as inept, empowered without having to be hard-arse anacondas, respected without having to put up a just-because-I'm-a-woman fight, and understood on our very fluid mental and emotional quotient about fifty to sixty percent (or at least forty percent) of the time (let's not get too carried away as we generally do also prefer not being understood at all times!).

Make no mistake, being understood is not as important as being heard - at all times. Make sense? No? That's perfectly alright, so long as some of it filtered through... somewhere.

I am often still regarded as being too bold and outspoken, especially during the to-ing and fro-ing of arranged match-making. Of

the very many prospective husbands I had the opportunity to speak to, none of them could handle a girl with an opinion or a witty comeback. None of them really had the grace to take one with good humour and, more importantly, recognise it as a sign of not being bereft of a personality! The interesting twist is that initially most men get very intrigued by and pursue a girl who has opinions and is not easily intimidated. Curiosity abated, the very thing that caught their attention is then dismissed and filed under 'too much work required.' Instead of upping their game, they'd rather - eventually - not put in the effort.

The thoughts and opinions expressed below are mine and may be reflective of many women out there, but certainly not all of them. See, if diversity is appreciated in its physicality, then it should also be appreciated in spirit and behaviour.

Here goes...

While I get that most women are suckers for praise, even if it is superficial and presumptuous, any praise coming our way is not thwarted because it is just so much simpler to let it fly. That said, please curb the enthusiasm for false praise and run-of-the-mill pickups. They stink. Show genuine interest if you are genuinely interested. If not, then don't be so hurt when you get served the same.

There are many women out there looking for casual relationships, do make sure that you are clear about what you want from a relationship, and share it so that both sides know what they are getting into. Admittedly, at times, women will play some mind games just to see how into them you are. Please save everyone the hassle and cut the chase short; tell us how you really feel because the more tight-lipped and clammed-up you are, the more we feel the need to poke, prod and pry you and your feelings out. Women love to talk. Often and a lot; with their men, their family, their girlfriends and strangers. That's just how it is. Accept it as part of our DNA and don't judge us. Just listen; forty-five percent of the time will do splendidly.

Sometimes jealousy is hot. It's good to feel the burn at times, never always. If you needed us so badly in your lives, then please also understand that rarely are the ladies interested in being your part-time anything. Commit to your relationships wholeheartedly, be it friendship or romantic. Unless your lady is truly the incarnation of the *Wicked Witch of the West*, women do understand and are willing to support you in your difficult times, just keep the hot 'n cold attitude at bay as it is seriously off-putting and ignites a whole new level of the same from us. Not so nice to be on the receiving end of it, is it?

Keep the chase real. If you can make the effort to chase us down until we give in - one way or the other - then also make the effort to not go dead-cold on us. Keep the love/lust/desire/ADHD in

check. Yes, we understand that you cannot be going full throttle all the time, once the chase is over the interest wanes, but in the real world it will save you a lot of hassle to pitch in the effort every now and then. You'll be surprised with the positive results.

Once we accept you, you become our go-to person for all our issues in life. It's a privilege, not a curse. The very same philosophy applies to our other things-to-do too. Oh, and while we crave the absolute gentleman, we do know that the bad-ass kick 'em-to-the-curbside is sometimes a welcome and refreshing change of pace! Also, being in our circle of trust, we put you in the centre of our Universe and it's only natural that we expect the same in return.

On the flip side, we want to, and need to, hear what's going on in your heads. We are happy to listen, and offer advice and be supportive. However, we are not your mother and by being too whiny, clingy and needy you seriously risk losing our respect, and it's a sure way to get us to un-love and unfriend you. A man who wears the pants in a relationship is a thumbs-up for sure. Own it and focus on its positives.

By respecting our family, friends and our other miscellaneous relationships, you only augment and boost your respect in our hearts and mind. Be kind, be gentle for we are delicate beings at the end of the day. Don't intimidate or scare us, save the Alpha for your work, peers, friends and rivals.

I am certain that many men would have zoned out with the intensive do's and don'ts, but for the brave few, it would only help to also go through *The Creation of Woman* written in the first century by an unknown Hindu author:

*In the beginning, when Twashtri came to the creation of woman, he found that he had exhausted his materials in making of the man, and that no solid elements were left. In this dilemma, after profound meditation, he did as follows: He took the rotundity of the moon, and the curves of creepers, and the clinging of tendrils, and the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of the reed, and the bloom of flowers, and the lightness of deer and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of the winds, and the timidity of hare, and the vanity of peacock, and the softness of the parrot's bosom, and the hardness of diamond, and the cruelty of the tiger, and the hot glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of dove and the fidelity of the drake. Compounding all this together, he made woman and gave her to man. But after a week, man came to him and said: "Lord, this creature that you have given me makes my life miserable. She chatters incessantly, teases me beyond endurance, never leaving me alone. She requires attention every moment, takes up all my time, weeps about nothing, and is always idle. So I have to give her back*

*again, as I cannot live with her!" Then, Twashtri said: "Very well," and took her back. After a week, man came to him saying: "Lord, I find my life is lonely since I surrendered her. I remember how she used to dance and sing to me, and look at me out of the corner of her eye, and play with me, and cling to me. Her laughter was music, she was so beautiful to look at, and so soft to touch. Pray give her back to me again." Twashtri said: "Very well," and returned the woman to the men. But after only three days had passed, man appeared once more before the creator, to whom he said: "Lord, I know now how it is, but after all, I have come to the conclusion that she is more trouble than pleasure to me. Therefore, I beg that you take her back again." Twashtri, however, replied: "Out upon you! Be off! I will have no more of this. You must manage how you can." The man quoted: "But I cannot live with her!" Then Twashtri answered: "Neither could you live without her." And he turned his back to man and went on with his work. Then the man said: "What should I do? For I cannot live with either or without her."*

I must admit that it does not sit well with me to only go on and on about what women want, even though it beautifully resonates the points made earlier; it would be great to hear what men want as well... aside from the universal check-list that any semi-bright woman can tick off of course!

**“Love is like a friendship caught on fire. In the beginning a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. As love grows older, our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep-burning and unquenchable.”**

*Bruce Lee*

# ANNE

Age: 53

Nationality: Irish

Place of Residence: Ireland

I am a divorced Irish lady. It is appropriate to be writing about relationships at this stage in my life because, if things had gone according to plan, I would also have been celebrating my 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this week. This lost anniversary is a good time to reflect and address some very significant questions, such as: what did my twenty-three year-old self want from marriage and why did it only last eleven years? In subsequent relationships, did I look for the same things in a man and is that why they also didn't last? Is it the men who are wrong? Or have I just made bad choices? I am currently in a long-term relationship and, in giving serious thought to these questions, am beginning to wonder if what I really want has ever changed.

From my earliest years, the only ambition I ever had was to be a housewife and mother and to create a loving home for the family that one day would be mine. In my mind, the man who would father my children and provide for us was a shadowy figure who would be like my dad - someone who stayed in the background but was always there to provide security and a kind or admonishing word as necessary. As you can probably tell, I grew up with my sisters in a very matriarchal family, with mum running the show and dad only part of our lives on Sundays and during the holidays. We lived a sheltered life at home, and I went to a private, Catholic convent school, so the opposite sex was pretty much an alien species to me; my first kiss was a week shy of my seventeenth birthday! Not really the best way to prepare for life in the big, bad world of relationships.

I was a fairly normal teenager (except if you compared me to my sisters) and eventually began to go out with school friends and meet BOYS. They both fascinated and scared me. As a complete tomboy, it was easy to talk to other people who enjoyed the same kinds of things as I did: sports, cars, outdoor pursuits etc. I was never a girly-girl and have always had more male than female friends, but the lads I hung out with were never more than mates, and they treated me (and those I'm still friends with still do) as a kid sister. With thick glasses and braces on my teeth, I knew I wasn't attractive to the opposite sex, so when I did get asked out I jumped at the offer and fell in love very quickly. My first boyfriend and I were together for over five years, and even planned on getting engaged. However, he was growing up to become a successful businessman and I couldn't bring myself to become a corporate wife - I was

training as a nurse at the time and wanted to spread my wings, join the army, have a life... but still completely naïve and ignorant of the 'grown-up' world. It terrified me!

After this first relationship and on my own for the first time but still living at home, I used to go out and get drunk, and into big trouble where men were concerned. My mother and sisters made it clear that I was no longer welcome at home with my odd hours and loud music, so I quickly accepted a marriage proposal from a fellow nurse - older and 'wiser' than me, apparently protective, who let me be myself and shared my interests and, most importantly, wanted a family. What did that silly little girl really want? To escape from an unhappy life and create the family of her dreams. During the short engagement - we met and married in fifteen months - he was everything and more I could have hoped for: kind, intelligent, fun, practical, a good earner, loved his umpteen nieces and nephews, and accompanied me to whatever activity or event I wanted to attend. What clinched it for me, however, was that he wasn't after my body like so many of the other men I had come across. He wanted to wait until we were married before we shared a bed and that, to me, meant that he loved me just for myself, and I felt completely safe with him. Safety. That's what I really, really wanted. The safety of a loving marriage in which I could feel protected and within which I could create the loving family I had always wanted.

What went wrong? It took six years for the first baby to arrive but before that I worked and made a lovely home for us wherever we lived. What I hadn't banked on was that the security I had craved turned out to be a prison. Once that gold band was on my finger, I was owned, everything had to be his way... or else. I could be myself and do what I wanted as long as it was okay with my husband. I used to describe it as having to keep my real self in a box, so it wouldn't set him off. Of course, I could never keep myself closed in all the time and sometimes I'd just have to stand up for myself, despite the consequences. Why did I stay? I was still too scared of facing life on my own and, being a good Catholic girl, marriage was for life. Oh, I knew within six months I'd made a big mistake and, if I'd known how to go about it, would have left after two years, but I'd made my bed and felt that it would be better to make the best of it rather than be on my own. My granny had raised three children on her own after her husband had left her, and I didn't want to end my days relying on only a handful of grandchildren for love and companionship. I did everything I could to appease my husband and be a good wife but, even after the children arrived, things only got worse. I was growing up at last and had also become the main provider for the family. The 'box' had got too small for me and his mental health couldn't handle me wanting to be an equal partner. His methods of controlling me had to increase to keep me afraid, but now I had children I was a

tigress... up to a point. I was, at this stage, terrified of my husband but suicide wasn't an option because then the boys would be left alone with him. I couldn't fight but I could run, and that's what I did. The boys and I went to a women's refuge until the courts barred him from the home and my life - eleven years and two months of marriage, over.

Where did he go wrong? Instead of wanting to control me, he should have cherished me and got the best out of me. But then again, I rushed into marriage without taking time to get to know him properly. Looking back, the clues were there but I was too caught up in my dream of escape to the security of a family life to pay attention. He could have used a carrot instead of a stick. He could have accepted treatment for his depression. Could have, should have, didn't. He was himself and probably should never have married anyone in the first place! He got it wrong alright, but maybe not as wrong as I did.

And I kept on getting it wrong.

When I returned home from the refuge with my boys, I might have been physically safe and able to enjoy family life as a single parent, but weekends they had to spend with their father and the empty house was unbearable - especially as it emerged that he was now controlling the children and they were becoming afraid too. In time, the law had to help with that too, but meanwhile I was a mess. Weekends became a blur of alcohol and hanging out with a male friend (of the family). The perfect mum from Sunday to Friday but a crazy mixed-up kid the rest of the time. Had I learned anything from my teenage years? Not a bit of it! This new man was a drinker but also kind, generous and gorgeous looking and I wasn't looking for a relationship, just some comfort and the closest thing to love that I could get when my boys were away. And I got exactly what I wanted, plus a bonus; a third child to raise without a man around the house! I hadn't learned anything, had I?

Well, I've made many mistakes down the years but repeating them isn't a habit of mine but this one was a real cracker, but it was also the best thing that could have happened to the family. I sobered up and from then on concentrated on being the mother and housewife that I'd always aspired to be. The dreamer in me hoped that my new baby's dad would want to marry me and join the family, but my dreams tended to be way too pie-in-the-sky. This time I had chosen a younger man and he went off with a younger woman. Our wants just didn't coincide, and my already battered heart was broken and turned to stone, and from now on men were to be strictly out of bounds, unless one was needed to do something that I wasn't capable of, such as fixing the car or plumbing! Despite everything, this was an idyllic time in me and my family's lives. We grew our own vegetables, had lots of pets including a lamb and chickens, beach-

combed for firewood, and our home was filled with music and laughter. I painted and decorated, knitted and sewed, and the boys and I played, and played, and played. In the background still was my father; a strong, loving shoulder, a fantastic granddad, and a great help all round. Could I ever want a man again?

Stupid question! I'm a woman and have hormones. Of course I felt the need for love of the physical kind, but I didn't want to be one of those single parents whose children get to have lots of 'uncles' wandering in and out of their lives. My very private life was catered for when I'd go to my home city to visit my dad and see an old friend... of the male persuasion. However, as the boys grew up, I regretted the fact that they didn't have a good male role model - under the age of eighty (apart from a couple of gay friends of mine). I also worried that they may not learn how to treat a woman when their turns came to have relationships, because they didn't have any example at home. I was also becoming increasingly lonely with the children at school and my dad and his Alzheimer disease now living with us. Dreamy, older me began to think that dipping my toe into the world of relationships again might be good for all of us. So I wrote a list of what I *didn't* want in a man.

It was a long list and I still have it, but there's way too much detail to share here. Suffice to say that at the top of the list was no control freaks. It also included items such as no alcoholics and no spongers. I wrote a lot of anger into that list, anger that I hadn't realised was inside me. Most of all I was angry with myself for being such a fool about men and rubbish at relationships. It was time I learnt how to relate properly to other adults, male and female. On the advice of a friend, I joined an online friendship/dating site and began to talk to the opposite sex again. I even went out socially on occasions, but that only created gossip in the village so that was kept for when I went to the city. In a less negative mood I also started to seriously think about what I would look for in a man who I might like to spend the rest of my life with. Yes, I am a serial monogamist and still hoped to find that happily-ever-after relationship.

At this stage I knew a few of the things that I would definitely find attractive in a man; intelligence, a similar sense of humour to mine, slightly wacky in a nerdy kind of way, and with a smile that reached his eyes. My dating profile highlighted the tomboy in me, even posting a photo of myself up in a tree one Christmas morning. It got results and I would meet a man now and again for coffee. Sometimes I would find I'd picked what I would call scumbags - men looking for sex or to cheat on their wives. A big no, no. The good guys were rarities on the website, but we'd chat online for hours. Around this time I was spending a lot of nights awake with my dad, as he'd be wandering around making breakfast over and over again and once he even set the house on fire! [Supermum got everyone out

into the garden, put out the blaze, cleared the house of smoke and had the family tucked back into bed with hot drinks in less than an hour]. Life was crazy busy and nights were my time to reach out and find friends and companionship. I needed someone - anyone - to be myself with. Days of being a mum, carer and breadwinner left little time for me to feel like a human being. It was hard doing everything on my own, no matter how good I am at the practicalities of life. Don't get me wrong, despite all the crises, life was great in a strange kind of way; the boys were doing well and it was a bitter-sweet joy to care for my dear dad as long as possible. My personal life was definitely improving as there were a few gems among the dross on the dating site. We met, we got on brilliantly, decided that the spark wasn't there and who, years later I am still friends with some of them. No romance to speak of, but I did get to meet some men who didn't scare me or who didn't want to own me, and with whom I could be myself. It was a start.

It was also a risk. After my father eventually passed away I was once again floating alone in a sea of people without a rudder or a map. My friends (of both sexes) were wonderfully supportive, but life goes on and I was supposed to be an adult and able to look after myself. My eldest son would soon be moving on to college and, as I certainly wasn't coping with 'life after dad', his youngest brother went to live with his father in the next town. The family became fragmented during the week and so I threw myself into work and weekend motherhood. It dawned on me that time was ticking away and I was already feeling the stirrings of empty-nest syndrome. Part of me still hoped to meet a wonderful man - a combination of the men who had become my friends - and that missing chemistry. I thought that I knew what I wanted in a man but was becoming resigned to the fact that he didn't exist outside of my head. My dreams turned into nightmares of becoming the mad-cat-lady who lived from one visit from an adult son to the next. Only one thing to do - live another dream. I applied to go to university and planned a move with son number two to the nearest city. A great change of life for us both and weekends we would see the my other lads. Part of the plan was that I would be among fellow students of all ages, and improve my social skills along with my education, and I would make sure to avoid any campus romances. That all worked out perfectly, but while I had turned my back on romance, it was still out to get me.

Shortly after being offered a place at university, a man came into my life, and we are still together. What happened? Was he Mr. Right, or had I changed? Back to the list; he is intelligent, funny, shares a lot of my interests and we have similar mental furniture. His smile and twinkling blue eyes will always make me melt and, despite all my baggage and scarred heart, he loves me. He is a kind, caring,

gentle giant of a man, and everyone who knows him has nothing but good to say of him. Checks all the boxes and then some! He's someone who I had met years before and become mates with, and so I was already acquainted with a lot of his family. He's had his own problems and carries a few trunk-loads of baggage, but now we help each other with the weight. Another important aspect of what I had learned when looking for a man; friendship first and then take it slowly. As we lived in different countries and I was studying, it was a long-distance relationship with regular visits each way across the Irish sea. We discovered that we understood and respected each other, and although in many ways we are very different, he put it in a nutshell when he told me that: "Our strengths complement each other." After three years at university, and with my boys busy doing their own things, they gave me their blessing to move to London and have a life of my own with the man they felt would take good care of me for them.

It may seem strange to some that I couldn't find what I really wanted in a man from Ireland, but although I was born and bred in Dublin, I've actually got more English blood in me than Irish; my mum was a Londoner and my dad's father was a Yorkshire man. Being a half-and-half has shaped my attitudes and given me a broader outlook on life than many of my compatriots. Many Irish men of my generation were raised by the old-school Irish-mammy. In other words, they were spoiled rotten by their mothers and expected their wives to be a pale imitation of the Saint that reared them, while they played the same independent role that their fathers did. Having never experienced this type of family life, I now realise that my marriage was doomed from the start as my husband hadn't understood my wants and needs, and didn't bother to try. In later years I learned that there is a mindset among men in Ireland who think that a divorced woman must be dying for it, and is fair game for the seedier type of relationship. This is something that men get really, really wrong. Divorced women are vulnerable and many, like me, have been seriously damaged by previous relationships. This does NOT mean we are sluts! True, post-separation flings happen; they can ease the pain, the loneliness and feelings of self-doubt for a while, but what women like me really want more than anything else after a bad break-up is friendship and companionship.

Why do men find it so hard to give women what they really want? I honestly believe that it's down to general ignorance and a lack of understanding or, in some cases, an unwillingness to believe that they need to learn about the opposite sex in order to have good relationships. We women also need to be more open to learning about our potential partners, because successful relationships are those where there is constant two-way communication leading to understanding and acceptance of the other's different wants and

needs. First of all though, you have to know yourself so that you can understand what you are looking for.

It has taken me thirty years to get to this point in my life and my most successful relationship with a man. I have had to learn about myself and what I really wanted before meeting someone who I could recognise as being a truly potential partner. Over the past five years we have learnt a lot about each other, but know that it is a process which will never stop. If you live life to the full you continue to grow and develop as a person, and if you are part of a couple you need to keep up with each others' changing wants and needs. Deep down, however, I'm still a dreamer and what my man calls a 'geezer-bird' in the London vernacular. I still need to feel secure, but not in the way I used to. I feel safe being myself but I now have the added security of loving companionship, which I hope will continue indefinitely. We don't always get it right, but when either of us gets it wrong we talk it over and work out how to avoid that particular pitfall. That's our key to success: communication.

And what is it that I really want in my man? At the end of the day it's almost exactly what I've always wanted; someone to make a home with, to enjoy family visits from the boys with and, most of all, to share my life with.

**“When you have seen as much of  
life as I have, you will not  
underestimate the power of  
obsessive love.”**

*J. K. Rowling*

# VICKI

Age: 36

Nationality: Canadian

Place of Residence: Canada

I once heard that a woman marries a man hoping that he will change, but a man marries a woman hoping that she won't change. The problem with this theory is that a woman has to change because her role often does change in a relationship, particularly when she becomes a mom.

I can imagine that men have difficulty anticipating what kind of changes will occur when they become parents. My beloved husband Andy and I spent the first year of our son's life bleary-eyed and barely able to match a pair of socks, let alone keep our relationship from going stale. We forgot how to date and we forgot all the joyful things we had done for each other in previous years. Everyday we functioned on autopilot, just trying to keep up with this new sparkle in our life; our son Benjamin. In return, we often missed each other's sparkle, and we forgot about the mutual support we had built between us over the course of several years.

So, after many meetings and discussions, I proactively created this list as a reference guide, with tips and tricks to revitalize our relationship. (Now I am speaking on behalf of wives in general here who are new moms but, I know Andy will cherish this as well because he loves lists, especially 'Honey Do,' lists. I can see him pinching the bridge of his nose while he is reading this, as he often does when I say something he doesn't want to talk about).

Well honey, this is a pretty big 'Do' list:

## **HOLIDAYS**

These become more important as the relationship progresses. The everyday routine starts to become even more mundane for new moms. We wake up and then the cycle begins: Eat, Chores, Diaper, Eat, Chores, Diapers, and maybe... Sleep, if we are fortunate enough. So when it is time to celebrate being a mom, or the day we are born, we tend to get really excited about it. It's not about expectations of extravagance, it's about making the holiday an out-of-the-ordinary day... in a kind way. Simple gestures to change the routine are appreciated; making a cup of tea, or cooking breakfast for example. (Please note; it does not count if you cook breakfast and then go out while we clean it up!). Do something that took enough planning for us to notice that it is special, but not too much that we feel guilty about

the time you spent. It's all about balance. Oh, bonus points for letting us SLEEP IN!!!!

## **HOLIDAY GIFTS**

Like holiday actions, they are not meant to be expensive. Just do something special or different. Do something that proves that you know your wife more than anyone else in the world, and you have been paying attention through the years when she tells you about her likes and dislikes. IMPORTANT - No gift purchases should be from the following; a thrift store, a dollar store, your workplace (unless you work in a diamond mine), the house, a yard-sale, or the gas station. Please also remember to take off the price tag. We don't want to know it was on the reduced to clear rack at Walmart! I will give you an example of a minor let down. One year, Andy became the Cheese Ambassador at the local supermarket (not surprising given his love and knowledge of food). Do you know what I got for Mother's Day? Yup, a basket of cheese! Which *he* dug into at breakfast-time. I do like cheese but I knew he walked a total of twenty feet from his cheese counter to the checkout to purchase it for me. OK, thirty feet if you count passing the wine store in the supermarket. Previously, he even told customers that on a Saturday night he occasionally likes to treat me with a bottle of wine, some chocolate and fancy cheese. The only problem is he had never done this before; it was a complete sales tactic!

## **HOUSEWORK**

We will never frown upon taking initiative to do extra chores. In fact, be creative! Find the novelty in a chore that you have never done before. For example, have you ever heard the sound that a toilet seat makes when it drops to close? No? Just try it, it sounds like a drum... almost musical! (Or is it just music to my ears?!).

## **DIY**

Just because something is broken does not mean you have to be the one to fix it. Why complicate life for yourself if you need a professional? We know the new power tools are just itching to leap from the boxes into your hands, however I'm not sure that a hammer can fix so many things. Was it designed to do that? Promise us that if you are not a trained professional, you will ask yourself these questions: Will your wife be OK if you attempt to fix something of hers and you break it further? Is it worth the risk for the adrenaline rush when using the new power tools? Oh, have you read the

instructions when needed, or have you just tossed them in the bin? Remember... these are *all* important questions.

## **BROMANCES**

Yes, going out with buddies is important. Us wives want you to be social, of course we do. However, timing is everything. For instance, let's say the weather isn't great and the weather channel has issued a thunderstorm warning with the possibility of a tornado, and your wife is afraid of lightening and power outages. Is that a good time to go out? Maybe not! Also, when you go out, please understand that we ask for a home time and this is not to be controlling. Rather we, as moms and wives, worry about the whole family; it's part of our job description. When you are late coming home, we imagine the worse thing possible sometimes; have you fallen or passed out? Have you got lost? Did you get hurt? In your drunken stupor, did you decide all of a sudden that we have enough money in the bank to send you to the World Cup and are you on a plane? Yes, rationality does not always come into play in this situation. As a result of this anxiety, we cannot get to sleep, even though we have been told to sleep when the baby sleeps. Remember that sleep is priceless, so please do not let a 1 o'clock promise turn into a 3 o'clock reality, unless you call and let us know you are OK.

## **SOCKS**

One little point that will make a BIG impact if followed; socks with holes are disturbing to all witnesses. Please discard these immediately. I am not sure if this is applicable to all husbands, but I thought it was worth including.

## **SUPPORT**

Life is full of abundance and then droughts. We have to be sure to support each other in both situations. We are not perfect, and in today's world expectations have been put on us in a different way than they were put on our mothers and grandmothers. We not only have to be moms and wives, but entrepreneurs, teachers, finance officers, time managers, and we have to balance many responsibilities all at once while still making sure everyone is fed. We are always on duty and always on alert when making the best choices to protect the whole family. We love you and our life together more than ever before, but we also sometimes miss our identity, our freedom, and our independence. Once in a while give us a bit of time on our own to nourish that part of ourselves. And sometimes we may be sharp with you because sometimes we are tired. OK, we are

always tired. Remember this when you look over at us once and a while without us knowing.

Hopefully you will wonder how remarkably one little person can get so much done. In these moments, when we least expect us, tell us how much you appreciate that we will always put our family first. Give us a hug and tell us no matter what, everything will be OK. Simple.

**“There is only one happiness in  
this life, to love and be loved.”**  
*George Sand*

# ELIZABETH

Age: 77

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

Geoff lived opposite my adopted aunty and uncle in the next village, and we'd all played together from about seven years-old. He was the only child of loving parents, but never spoiled, and he was shy like me. He was doing his National Service in the navy and he didn't want to make any plans until his service ended, which I admired him for. I'd known him like a brother, always polite and ready to help anyone. He'd never put me down or deceive me, so when he invited me on a motorcycle ride the day after an evening together at a local dance, I was very excited. We went to a well-known village café where cyclists all met up to swap tales and drink tea or coffee. We left there to go and see a large wooded area nearby. Geoff was a country boy and loved nature, as I did. It was autumn and the sheer beauty of the trees made us gasp. Although we'd seen it many times before... a sea of fiery reds, oranges, yellows mixed with bronze and varying shades of green spread before us. Leaves were scattered haphazardly around the tree boles, and we both remained silent just taking in the magic of the setting. It was then that he put his arms around me and gently kissed me, before taking my hand and walking through the woods. When we'd made our way back to the motorbike, I realised that Geoff was still just as shy as I was, and that pleased me. He then took me home, and said goodbye, as I knew he'd be back on the training ship very soon. I also hoped we'd meet at the ballroom again when he came home, and contentedly waited for that time, feeling he'd thought the same unspoken words.

His leave came at Christmas and I was getting ready for the dance that evening, and to seeing Geoff again, when my brother's wife told me that she'd heard Geoff had died the evening before. A hit and run driver had run through red lights and killed Geoff outright as he was making his way home.

Like my mother and her mother before her, I was psychic; I dreamed real things which would then happen, received unspoken messages and *knew* untold things. I was later to qualify as a Tarot card reader, also in Angel healing, Psychometry and other branches of the art, and I realised that these things could be helpful when looking for love and understanding relationships, learning to meditate and accept life as it was - and is - and to get on with living. It was much later in my life when I was at a 'reading night' when the noted psychic picked me out... she said she'd got a message from Geoff to say he was sorry, and that the accident hadn't been his fault. I simply

replied saying that I knew that he wasn't to blame. I realised that. I had not only heard the message from Geoff many years before - like an echo - but had seen Geoff's worried face! I still, to this day, talk to him in my head and know he smiles at me.

A few months after Geoff died I met my first 'proper' boyfriend, he was on National Service leave from Germany. We met in the *Majestic* ballroom and laughed and danced the evening away before arranging to meet again. When he went back to his unit we exchanged letters, and he said he was looking forward to his next leave when we could be together again.

During the next leave he introduced me to his mother, a nice homely woman with a ready smile, and also to his father, an insurance agent. We visited cinemas and dance-halls, and took long walks until eventually it was time for him to return to his unit for the final time. It was in the family kitchen that he asked me to marry him (how romantic - *not*) and said we would get engaged very soon; at the end of his army employment. I don't ever remember saying yes to him though, but he was such a self-assured young man, I think he believed any woman would be foolish not to snap him up!

I was very wary, knew I needed to heed my inner voice. On our last walk together before he went back, we discussed our 'hypothetical' future and him finding employment. I said, if we were to marry, that we must start saving up for our future home and to my surprise he said 'yes,' he'd save every penny... and buy himself a motorbike as he'd always wanted one! He then said that he'd get a job and be able to go have a drink with the boys after work - like his father always had (and still did), while I'd be preparing his evening meal and keeping the house clean! I was too shocked to reply, he'd got *my* dull future mapped out very neatly. I was making a career for myself and was of an independent nature, so I was not about to throw all my hard work away, but I kept quiet that night as I was now seeing this selfish side of him and needed time to think about the situation. And then all the little put-downs and manipulations during our time together came back to me, all said casually as though he were 'helping' me; why was I wearing high heels as he had to look up to me slightly? Why was I not wearing a better dress, why did I look like a schoolgirl with my ponytail?

He went back to Germany for his final tour of duty and I received a letter from him which, this time, I didn't answer for two weeks. After another letter arrived I realised I had been dreading the sort of life I'd have with him. What really hit home though was that I wasn't missing at all him since he'd gone back, and I needed to tell him this sooner than later. So I did, no recriminations, in my final letter to him.

I was now twenty years-old and some friends and I went to a hotel where there were cabaret nights. We were looking for

somewhere suitable to celebrate my twenty-first birthday in style, in three months time. It was there I met Joe and was swept off my feet. My stomach did somersaults and I kept blushing. He was down-to-earth, every word he spoke was the truth, and he laughed a lot. He'd no money, no aspirations at that time, but that didn't bother me. My parents worried that he was seven years older than me, but that didn't bother me either. He wasn't perfect; he'd a habit of exaggerating at times to make himself look a bit more important... but who doesn't? He'd signed on as a regular soldier at eighteen and served abroad. It was when his mother died that he came home for her funeral and didn't sign up again. He was also a bit of a fighter (having boxed for his regiment) and together, with his friends, he thought a good Saturday night out should end with a fight in the village market square against the sailors from the local navy training ship. I let him quietly know that he didn't need to show himself as the biggest or the best... that was a *man* thing! I told him he was one of the best and, for all his daftness, I loved him.

I used to send Joe off to work with a packed lunch and now and again would put little rhymes, messages or jokes in the box, and he'd come home grinning but shaking his head and raising his eyes to the sky. At times he'd bring his lunch box home filled with blackberries or plums that he'd gathered or been given, and I'd use to make jam.

He had the usual 'man' traits of course... wanting to meet his friends (who were my friends as well) most nights after work for a quiet drink, a game of dominoes or darts, or coming home at one o'clock in the morning after a game of cards. I never complained about this, but made sure that the weekend evenings were for us and our friends whilst he still had his 'man time'.

He hated holidays; said he'd done enough travelling in the forces but I could go if I wanted! We'd been to Blackpool for a week in the early '70s. In the '80s Joe and a group of pals went off to Paris for the Arc de Triumph horse races at Longchamp. We wives suggested they do it again the following year - but that we went too, which worked out brilliantly.

Joe never once raised his hand to me although I'm sure I drove him very close to it at times. We only had one row every ten years, then choosing to go to our own little spaces to simmer down. How many times he had shook his head and declared, "I'll never understand you women," then given a wry smile. Men's logic is rarely women's logic!

Loving somebody is about giving and taking in fair shares, not being overbearing or bullying. Loving someone is also about having concern, thoughtfulness and understanding. Joe had these qualities in bundles and that's what bound us together for fifty years until his death from cancer. We shared deeply the love of nature, birds,

animals and the countryside, which was enhanced by us living in a lovely village with a river nearby. We had a gorgeous border collie and two cats which we cherished.

**“Love is substance; Lust, illusion.  
Only in the surge of passion do the  
two mingle in confusion.”**

*Calvin Miller*

# CLAUDIA

Age: 46 years

Nationality: German

Place of Residence: UAE

We all have different expectations and needs. We are human beings, neither computers nor machines. We are individuals and certainly have our ego. This is the biggest challenge when it comes to relationships, as we may focus more on our own needs rather than on the needs of our partner.

As a man have you ever asked yourself: Do I really care about my partner? Am I interested in her personality? Her needs and desires? Do I know what she wants? Do I pay attention to what she is saying? Do I listen? Or do you just want to hear what *you* want to hear, ignoring the rest, and projecting what *you* like onto your partner, and what you want to see in that person? Your answers may vary but guess what? A relationship is a two-way communication! It's a team-play, not just a home run! So, what do I personally really want in a man and in a relationship? Actually, it's pretty simple:

**Respect** - Show me that you respect my ideas, my career, interests and friends. We may have different views on certain topics, which is fine, but try to honour my opinions as valuable contributions. Treat me as you would like to be treated, be fair and considerate.

**Honesty** - Not everything in life goes the way we want it to go, but be honest to me. Have you cheated on me? That's truly not great news but at least tell me! I am not made of glass. Things like this may happen but there is a solution for everything in life. It hurts, but it's better to face the challenge before it's too late, and you will avoid a thorny rose battle! Don't lie to me about important matters. Just be a little bit gentle with your words, not brutally honest.

**Communication** - This goes along with respect and honesty. Talk to me. Be open. Have trust in me! Share your thoughts and concerns. Don't hold them back. I want to know the things that are going on in your life, your pleasant or unpleasant experiences. We are one, a team. The other way round, it's nice to hear you say: "I love you" every now and then. I know that you do but say it. Tell me if a dress looks nice on me, or if my cooking was delicious. I like to hear words of appreciation.

**Good Listener** - One of the most challenging task for a man is being a good listener. Naturally, I'm more emotional than you and I like to

talk. I have plenty of stories to tell and want to share them. If you can genuinely listen to me for more than ten minutes, then you are my greatest hero!

**Attention** - Be thoughtful. Plan something special once in a while. Surprise me. A flower bouquet says more than a thousand words. A picnic date at the riverside may be more romantic than any five-star candle light dinner in a posh restaurant. Be creative. Show me that you care about me.

**Care** - Be there for me when I need you most. I don't want to be alone in my life and carry all the burden by myself. Be true to me in good times and in bad times, in sickness and health, in career crises or financial instability. It may sound selfish, but we all want a shoulder to lean on, someone to make our life a little easier. On the other hand, I will do the same for you and be there for you when days look gloomy.

**Humour** - Make me laugh. Make me smile. Be witty. Cheer me up after a stressful day at work. There is nothing better and more bonding than enjoying some funny moments together.

Last, but not least...

**Time** - Simply make the time to be with me. There might be phases in life where we have to shift priorities but, as your partner, I should be always your top priority.

Does this all sound difficult? I don't think so! But why do men sometimes get it so wrong? There are various reasons why men get it wrong in a relationship; talking at cross-purposes, lack of commitment, egoistic and narcissistic tendencies. Let's face the truth, men are simple creatures, they tend to be wishy-washy, all over the place. We women need attention and presence. We need reliability. We do have our careers and understand that men have theirs. Thus we juggle multiple things by ourselves such as job, kids and household, and we care for a happy relationship. We just expect a bit understanding and support in what we are doing. Men, on the contrary, put work or anything else ahead of the relationship. We make the effort to manage our work-life balance in our partnership, hence we expect you to be fair and do the same for us.

We women are not as difficult as men think. But a relationship is not always wine and roses. If something bothers us, we want to talk about it and clear the air. A man doesn't like complications in his partnership, he'd rather escape from a serious conversation than face the heat. Would you do the same if your boss

puts you in a tricky business situation? I bet, not! You would work it out. Reality is; a strong and enduring relationship doesn't come with a recipe. It takes lots of hard work.

**“To fear love is to fear life, and  
those who fear life are already  
three parts dead.”**

*Bertrand Russell*

# JENNY

Age: 25

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

When I first sat down and thought about the direction I wanted this piece to go, I realized that by thinking about it in this way, I would not be doing justice to it, so I decided to just put all my thoughts down on paper and see how it turned out.

I am an Indian and like most NRI's (Non-Resident Indian), I have been born and brought in good 'ole Bahrain (although I did go to Bengaluru, India to do my grad-school). So, if you ask me; Bahrain is home. I've got the best of both worlds.

At the time of this being written, my boyfriend of four years had just proposed to me in the most breathtaking way possible. Suffice to say, I'm still in dreamland.

When you ask me, what I personally want in a man, I don't have a ready list of approved criteria. That's the thing, if I had to have a list, then where is the fun? Where is the spontaneity? Yes, there was a basic one though, and it just had two points;

- A) Love me with all of your heart.
- B) A big NO-NO to abuse of any kind.

In my opinion, love does not come in any kind of manual; regardless of how many books or articles you read on how to pick the right man, or why women are so difficult, you are probably not going to find a man who ticks all your boxes. The point of love is discovering each other and each other's world. You are going to make mistakes but do not take mistakes as a sign of failure, it's another chance you get to do it all over again. Sure, the likeliness of you getting hurt is high on the scale, but so is the likeliness of you experiencing and loving the unknown path your life is taking.

I was watching a show called *Chasing Life* the other day, and there was this phrase that the mother said that struck my emotional nerve (especially since I'm getting hitched soon). It was: "*There is no one true love. Marriage is not about finding the exact person destined to be yours forever. It does not mean that no one is ever going to compare to them, and it definitely doesn't mean that you are never going to fight. It means that you are willing to put in the time and the effort to make sacrifices. Marriage is about commitment, and commitment is romantic.*"

So here is the thing; no one is perfect. You are going to have differences and probably not going to agree on what kind of teriyaki

you want to have for dinner, but you are also going to be in love with the man you chose to stand beside you through it all, and you are going to experience life's different stages and blessings with him. And that is what makes it perfect. I see how my parents do it, how even after all those years they are so in love. Even after the hardships life threw at them back in their younger days, they still held on to each other. If they did it so well, so could I.

Oh, and the other thing; most times men *don't* get it wrong. Sometimes, along the way, expectations change into demands, which in the end cause people's hearts to wander and eventually part ways. If you were to blame only the men for the relationship going down the drain, then you definitely need to take a good look in the mirror. It takes two to build a relationship and it takes two to break it.

This is my take on the whole scenario. People's opinion can be entirely different and that's fine too.

**“The wise are wise only because they love. The fool are fools only because they think they can understand love.”**

*Paulo Coelho*

# ZANELE

Age: 34

Nationality: South African

Place of Residence: South Africa

If there's one thing I cannot take from a man, it's lies; a liar is one sort of man I just cannot find myself romantically associated with, it's that simple. The reason being is that if a man has to lie about his actions, then that means I am dealing with someone who is not grown up enough to account for the things he does. If my man slept with my best friend, I would respect him more if he could be bold enough to come clean to me, rather than coming up with all sorts of lies just to cover the situation up. Loyalty, selflessness, honesty are some of the qualities I want in a man, not that I wouldn't mind anything more too! I love my man strong-willed; who wants a wimp for a man? Defiantly not me. If he believes something and he is truly convinced that it's the way he sees it (with valid facts of course), then he shouldn't be shaken by people who convince him otherwise, then that gives me the confidence to hold on to his word fearlessly. I love my man to be open to me about everything, from how my cooking is, to how my driving is. I love getting feedback from my man on how I do things - whether good or bad. The reason is simple; I'm a person who loves progress and growth and you can never have those things unless you know what you need to improve. However, above all these things that I have just mentioned is that I want a God fearing man! If he fears God, he does God's word! And from God's word he'll then understand fully what I'm supposed to be to him; a HELPER, not a maid, incubator, sex-slave or a chef. He'll understand that what is mine is to be submissive to him, and him to be loving towards me, as the bible says. Hurting someone intentionally is not being loving. Cheating, disrespecting, abusing and many of the bad things that men are doing to women are not in the scope of being loving.

Why do men get it so wrong? In my opinion I think the reason that men get it so wrong is that, in most cases, men who are able to satisfy a woman in bed and can afford to buy her expensive gifts, think they have done their duty or that is all that is expected of them. But that is certainly not the case.

**“Life is the flower for which love is  
the honey.”**  
*Victor Hugo*

# ARUN

Age: 34

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: The UAE

What do women want? Well... a sea-facing bungalow with Art Deco interiors. A husband, who is not just a business tycoon but also looks like Brad Pitt. Two lovely, intelligent, impeccably groomed kids, and of course holidays in Maldives, cruise trips and the works.

Ahh... if only it was that simple, to crack the magical code, to know what the mysterious ladies really want from their partners. But, by design, the man-woman relationship is such that the learning is made in the course of this beautiful journey.

In the last ten years of my love-hate, too much love relationship with my husband, I can only vouch for one fact; that men are indeed from Mars, and women are indeed from Venus. They are programmed differently, and so therefore they think, behave, emote, and react differently. And it doesn't help that women expect their men to understand the subtle nuances of a woman's moods and temperaments - something which even she is not able to decipher. And yes, the poor guys are also expected to distinguish between teal and turquoise while making décor choices for the home.

But there are some core issues that a woman would really expect from her man. And this would differ from individual to individual, depending on her cultural background, life situation and personal expectations. So let me share my two pennies on this topic, from my personal insights about the women from my family and society.

A few days back, when I made the routine call to my mom, I was also busy preparing the dinner. So, while I wasn't paying full attention to what mom was saying, strangely I was still able to give the perfect responses and hold a proper conversation. It was only when after I put down the phone that I realized that I knew every question mom would ask me, and I expected all the mundane complains that mom would tell me; the maid left suddenly, the unbearable heat, dad being glued to the newspaper as usual, etc., etc. And also the good stuff that she would tell me about; the new recipe that she tried, the grandson who was becoming smarter every day and the lovely flowers growing in the garden... and how she missed me! It was then that it struck me; what my mom really wanted was to share her thoughts and life, and to have someone close to listen to her attentively and to listen to the things that my dad probably found mundane and insignificant. And that's what I want. I want my husband to listen to my stuff, even the unimportant

stuff like the fight with the cab driver, or the gift I bought for my friend's baby shower, or my dinner menu. Because, by giving me your attentive ears, you make me feel important and cared for, and by sharing bits and pieces of my day and life, I feel closer to you. I guess that's one reason for you to look up from your mobile when I want to show my dress.

When a woman gets married in Indian society - as per the religious teachings - she is supposed to be as adaptable as water. She's expected to learn, accept and adopt all the rituals, festivals, lifestyle and even food habits of her husband, and her new home. So much so that, over time, the boundary between her own parents and her own siblings also gets blurred. I am not implying that it's a small life-change for the man, when he has to share his life and even his space with his wife and forgo lot of his freedom, but what a woman misses many times in this social change is for her partner to accept and love her parents and her family as his own too. Not just as parents of his spouse, but as his own family. To give them love and respect, like a son, and not just fulfil his duties as a son-in-law. And how nice it would be if he could remember and call her parents on their anniversary, even without a reminder.

When God made women, he was very generous and he bestowed her with the best; the strength of a mountain, the beauty of an angel, the heart of a mother and the softness of a rose petal. And since perfection is boring, he added some quirks - like an undying love for shopping or chocolates or colours. And this amalgamation of variety, this lovely collage is what makes women so beautiful. But many times her one feature becomes the predominant one, so when a man has a strong, independent woman, who can do it all, he ignores her softer side. And similarly, when her partner is a soft caring and loving woman, he forgets how strong she can be when the situation arises. A woman wants a man to know the difference between when she wants the hug, and when she wants to face the world on her own. That saying, however independent she is, she would still like the door to be opened for her and that he can share his worries with her. She can handle it.

This is one fine art; of being behind her as an anchor when she takes the tough calls, and to envelope her when she needs the soft comfort. But if you can do it, then you're her man!

When a man and a woman decide to share a house, they want to make it their home. So it's equally important for the man to share the role in this whole process, from the aesthetics and décor of the house, to keeping it organized every day. It gets very unnerving for a woman to see her man just as a co-sleeper in the house, and not someone who can be involved in every aspect of their home. She wants him to be as involved in the home, in the kids, in the parties they host, like he is involved in his cricket matches. To know the

names of his children's friends and their favourite toys, to help in planning the dinner menu for the holiday feast, to help in rearranging the closet... without asking. I know that's a tall order, but even if something is achieved even close to this target, then it would make a happier home.

Yes, that brings me to another aspect; that a woman wants her needs to be understood, without having to say so.

Lastly she is a woman who loves surprises, so go ahead and surprise her, however old the relationship is. She would love it when she gets that surprise gift, unexpected bouquet or even better, if she gets a letter from you. Just because you are together in a home, doesn't mean there's nothing special that you can do to bring a smile to her lips. Look in her eyes, hug her, hold hands.... in public too. As Brad Pitt once said: "A woman blooms in the love of her man," so go ahead and show her some sunshine of your love and affection.

If the golden relationship was based on these pearls of wisdom then why does it go wrong so many times? Why does the man fails to decipher these cryptic codes? Because most of the time these expectations are so cryptic that it gets confusing and misleading. When a man tries to pull up a chair for a woman and then she gives him the don't-be-so-theatrical look - even though she loves it - it sends a message to the guy to not be so showy. And hence forward, all public affections get restrained. So it's very, very important for the woman to send right signals or messages to the man through her body language or her responses. By default, a man gets confused with nuances; he prefers straightforward messages.

Also men are used to being focused on one activity or topic than to multi-task, unlike women. So he losses track of the multiple things she says. Hence again, a woman needs to be clearer in her communication and to give time to men to move from one topic to another, otherwise he will be lost forever in the puzzle that she loves to create.

Most men are used to the woman taking the lead in the home front, and they enjoy the bliss of ignorance; they think if there's no blast, there's no fire. So to shake him and to make him involved, a woman has to literally ask him to get involved. Slow and steady, but to keep him involved in the day-to-day tasks, without waiting for the day she would blast.

This is my little understanding and experience of the man-woman relationship. They are different and that's the beauty of relationships. But the key to bridge these differences is communication and expression of all the apprehensions, expectations, let-downs and most importantly, love. This would strengthen understanding and remove the barriers of ego, possessiveness and fear, and make you both more complete as a couple.

**“To be capable of steady friendship  
or lasting love, are the two  
greatest proofs, not only of  
goodness of heart,  
but of strength of mind.”**

*William Hazlitt*

# LINDA

Age: 31

Nationality: American

Place of Residence: USA

I won't pretend to know everything there is to know about relationships because, to be honest, I don't know everything. Not even close. However, in my personal experience it seems that the guys I have been with either are too clingy or give me too much space.

A couple of the guys I was with were really demanding and tried changing me into something I was not. They tried placing me on a pedestal or behind a gilded cage, in an attempt to cage my wildness, or tame me.

But I'm not some creature they can control and pull out at their leisure whenever they feel bored or want a good time. I am a living, breathing creature full of fire and hurricanes. I am intense, deep and passionate. I think my intensity and my depths drive them away because they cannot understand how strong a woman can be. They expect us all to be shrinking, terrified violets who bend to their every whim without putting up any sort of protest.

When I was a girl I was told not to make waves. I was a people pleaser, but I ended up being rather dissatisfied with myself, and I realized that, in trying to please everyone, I hadn't pleased anyone, especially not myself. So I stopped waxing and waning inward on myself. I took up writing as a way to speak without being interrupted.

One of my exes even tried controlling how or what I wrote, which was one of the most frustrating things in the universe to me. Writing is/was my escape, my outlet, and my way to be creative. I didn't tell him how to write, so I'm not sure why he thought it was acceptable to tell me how to.

I've got a bit of a rebellious streak, so the surest way to get me to ignore you is to tell me what to do. I don't mind instruction or advice so long as I asked for it, but don't give me unsolicited advice especially where it's unwelcome. That just drives me nuts.

I am a rather independent person, so I do like my space, but I feel if you give someone too much space then you start falling apart rather than together. Some space is good, mind you, but when all that remains between two people is distance rather than closeness and words, it's very easy for that relationship to crumble like a glacier melting into the sea due to global warming.

However, there is also the opposite end of the spectrum. If someone is too clingy and constantly wants to be around me, then I

am turned off. I don't mind sharing moments, photos and a part of my life with someone - obviously, that's what relationships are about - however, when someone is constantly by your side and doesn't even give you the chance to breathe, it can be really rather overwhelming.

I had one guy tell me that I was his inspiration to wake up, and that was a lot of pressure to put on me so I broke up with him. It's great to be loved and adored, but putting expectations on someone is never a good thing. Had he only said I inspired him or he found me inspiring, then it wouldn't have been such a big deal, but to insist that someone is your reason for waking up or going on is a little intimidating. People don't want that sort of pressure. Because then it could lead to expectations and expectations sometimes lead to disappointment, especially when someone cannot fulfil them.

I think a reason some of my relationships have failed in the past, too, is because of promises that were broken. Don't promise me tomorrow if you're not even willing to give me today. Just don't. If you cannot fulfil the promise you're making to someone then don't do it. It's just that simple. I am a woman of my word so I expect other people to mean their promises, too. When they do not, that leads to disappointment and my distrust of people, in general.

Also, lying really aggravates me. Just be honest. Even if you've done something wrong. One of my exes lied about cheating on me and when the truth came out I had no respect for him whatsoever. I found out the truth myself as he didn't even have the gall to tell me. This disgusted me beyond measure. Have a backbone for heaven's sake. If you can do something to hurt me like that, then own up to it. I may not like you, but I would like you a lot more than if I discover you're a liar on my own time. I just feel like if you don't want a real relationship then don't waste my time and if you want to be with someone else then you're clearly not that into me. Just let me go. I may not ever like you again, but that's your own fault for being a gross person to begin with. I have never seen the need to cheat on anyone; either be loyal to someone or don't be in a relationship with anyone. It's really that simple.

Communication has been a big challenge in some of my relationships, and I don't understand why. It's not so hard to tell me what you expect, or do not expect from a certain situation. At the same time, I've been talked over and ignored when I state my opinion sometimes, and that's not okay either. If I take the time to listen to you and your points in a discussion or argument, then you best listen to my take too, because my opinions and my feelings are no less valid than those that my partner has. Making someone feel like crap for what they feel like is a really bad move, not only does it make them think less of themselves, but they're less likely to want to tell you about anything they feel in the future. You need to be able to speak to people to understand, and truly listen to them rather than

simply waiting for your turn to speak. That gets really old, really fast, and it isn't something that I think anyone would appreciate. I certainly don't.

I also don't like expectations thrust on me; if I want to lose weight that's one thing, but don't make it seem as if I am some horrid cow that won't lose weight just so you'll find me more attractive. If you don't want to be with someone my size then don't be with me. I know that I'm not the skinniest person in the world, but I do try to keep myself healthy and I find it so offensive that someone would try to control me to the point that my weight is an issue. It's only an issue to the person who feels that there's an issue with it. I am beautiful as I am, so you can take me or leave me as you find me. Telling me to change for any reason is arrogant and rude; I am unapologetically me, so accept me as I am or watch me walk away. It really is that simple. If I don't feel valued or appreciated then I'm going to leave the relationship.

Also, be spontaneous! I've never had a guy give me gifts or flowers just because he wants to, it was always some special occasion, which is nice, don't get me wrong, but to only be remembered on special occasions makes me feel like dirt because I'm always the dotting type of person that tries to get little gifts or leave little notes to let someone know they're thought of. It would be really nice if they could reciprocate the gesture and think of me outside of the times where it's 'socially expected'. It doesn't even have to be roses. You could pick me some daffodils, or daisies, and I would be happy. It doesn't have to be the biggest box of chocolates, it could be a handmade card or the latest book from my favourite author. I would be ecstatic just to know that I was being thought of.

Everyone seems to think that love has to be some big, grand gesture. Really, love isn't about all the big moments, it's about all the little moments that weave and string together a bigger moment. It's about compassion, understanding, and sometimes compromise. Yet you should never have to compromise your values, your morals, or your beliefs for the sake of someone else. If someone asks you to change everything you are for them then simply walk away because you deserve better. We all do.

Just show them that you care and be there for them when they need you. Nothing is more frustrating than being for someone when they need you and then finding that they're not there for you when you're really struggling with a situation. Oh, and for the record, when I need help and you tell me that I'm a smart girl and I'll figure it out, that's not super helpful. I'm obviously looking for direction, so just help when someone asks you for it. Some people, like me, rarely ask for help so when we do it's because we need it and not because we're trying to be annoying or trying to bother you.

**“Love is a friendship set to music.”**

*Joseph Campbell*

# FARZANA

Age: 27

Nationality: Sri Lankan

Place of Residence: Sri Lanka

This is something I have been wanting to share with the world, more like scream at the world. Why women? Why should they be suppressed? Why should their dreams be cut off? Why should they be the ones to sacrifice and compromise? Why such hatred and negativity towards us? Why such narrow mindedness?

## **19 years-old**

I am a happy go lucky girl born and brought up in the Middle East. Who's to say that my life was about to change forever? I have lots of hopes and dreams. I want to make it big in the fashion world. Study hard, buy a house, get married to my Prince Charming. Is that all just words and dreams? Or would it become a reality?

Going to Sri Lanka, my parents motherland in a few weeks, feeling nervous as hell. Will I get to study? Will I get my dreams? Will I get a good job? Will we get a home? Lots of questions and doubts.

In Sri Lanka, our people - most of them, you could say - they never value women's education or their career. They think it's a waste of their precious time and money. At the end of the day, they are just going to get married at eighteen or probably younger. And then they can neither work nor study, and they are just going to look after their home and bear children. What's education for? What's a job going to do then?

## **20 years-old**

My parents are looking for suitors for my older sister. And what does everyone say? "Oh, she is fat!", "She is wearing glasses", "she is not pretty." Who gave you the right to judge her, mister? My father and his relatives are a nervous wreck. She is only twenty-two and they think that her life is over. They have to get her married off, or else she would never get married. And so they start looking for divorcees or older men who are filthy rich or in high places, as suitors. What for? She hasn't got any flaws and she isn't old. Then why such a hurry? There is always another day. Finally she finds a good suitor who understands her and loves her for who she is, and she is married. And now.. me? Wait just a minute there buddy. Now my kind aunt (paternal side) thinks I would be the perfect wife for her older son. And what do they have to say when I ask them why should I

marry him? He is kind and generous they say. He helps his mom. He doesn't get into unnecessary fights (not!). Well, he is a mama's boy. And so he will be perfect. That just sums it up. Well, being the hopeless romantic that I was, I gave in. I thought, well, everyone says he is nice and so I should probably say 'Yes.' And he has a killer smile. That ups the personality a little bit!

## **21 years-old**

Nobody ever seems to want to talk about my education. Well, my older sister decided to accept her fate and get married without thinking of her education, because that's the norm here. People spend their money on their daughters' marriages, but scratch their heads when they have to spend a penny for that same daughter's education. If you could take loans from people for marriages, why not use it for your child's education? It's not said anywhere that girls cannot study, is it? There goes my education. And a job? Well: "Dear, that place is too inappropriate", "There's just too many men working there." Well, you are planning on getting me 'married' to a complete stranger aren't you? No job.. That's my sorry life.. Sucking it up at home with no past-time, no hobbies, no job, no education. This society is cruel to women. They think if you find a suitor, who is ready to accept you without any dowry, it's your luck and you should accept it right away, because you will never again find someone so generous and kind. And there goes a girl's dreams of finding an understanding husband, because you hardly find men here with a good education, let alone common sense.

## **22 years-old**

It's been two years since I was proposed to by this guy. And he seems fairly nice. We have spoken over the phone, because he is working abroad. Well, he is a little old-fashioned; he doesn't think it's okay for me to study or work. Or maybe his parents think I shouldn't? That's okay, if he is a nice guy. Right? After all, he is going to look after me, is all I thought. But then he is a mama's boy. So he would listen to what I have to say, my likes and dislikes, and agree to them, and then his mom would brainwash him and he would tell me to do as his mom says, so I am getting married to 'his parents,' not him, apparently. His sister doesn't like me. Now is that my problem? And why do you bring up the issues we have at home into our conversation? That is just not your business. Whether I please your people or don't shouldn't affect our relationship because we are there for each other and there is no one else. But he thought that I should be the kind of daughter his mom wanted me to be – submissive and pleasing everyone all the time, working in the kitchen. But never

having a life of my own, dreams of my own or feelings of my own, because when I get married, I will be living with his parents. Which makes me married to them too? Please! So there ended that relationship that had no meaning. Because love sometimes just does not conquer all. Especially if it's not true pure love for one another. Everyone was against me when I ended this relationship, because I had wronged him and hurt his feelings. He was so heartbroken and he cried because once I decided there was no turning back, no words could make me change my mind. My younger sister and my mom, and some of my friends, were the only ones who thought I did the right thing. My older sister and relatives tried as they might to patch things up, whenever they had the chance. What did they know? I was the one who had to live the rest of my life with him and I realized then and there that marriage is NOT A BED OF ROSES.

### **23 years-old**

It just went by. Me, striving hard to achieve my dreams, make use of the resources I had to explore the art and craft world, read as much as I could, and prayed that I could achieve what I hoped to someday, and that marriage should never become a barrier between me and my dreams. My greatest support through thick and thin, I must say, is my younger sister. She stood by my side through all my trying times, and still does so. My strongest pillar. I could see a lot of girls losing their hopes and dreams to this so called 'bliss' named 'marriage.' Lots and lots of proposals came by. But I never changed my mind because I didn't want to be the sheep to any man's slaughter. I wished to be an independent woman, striving for myself. Though I was not sure where I would get the confidence. Finally, after so much of despair, depression, mental and emotional struggle, I got a job. But not a job I am good at because I have to go out and meet people, make conversations, sell their products. That's just not my cup of tea, not having been brought up that way, meeting strangers, always being inside closed doors, never having the chance to try new things or explore different aspects of my life, not being allowed to communicate with the opposite sex. Things just got harder and harder as I grew older. I couldn't bear to stand in the same room as the people I had to meet at work. I couldn't communicate with them. I didn't feel comfortable in their company. I just didn't like being in their company. But a far cousin of mine and my boss understood my dilemma and supported me and stood by me. They helped me to become slightly more confident than I was. And made me feel that I could achieve my dreams because I have so much potential in me, they said. And so I hoped.

## 24 years-old

I feel some kind of change in me - some maturity and responsibility. I feel like I can handle things alone if given the chance. I decided I needed a change of atmosphere or job. I didn't want to do something that I didn't love. So I decided to go for my love for accounting and try a job there. At the same time I got a chance to try my hand in designing. I got selected in a fashion competition. But I didn't become one of the finalists, and that hurt me a lot because I knew I wouldn't get another try. In the mean time, I hoped that I would get a man who would love me and cherish me and respect me for all that I am, and support me and help me fulfil my dreams. And no sooner had I said that, a suitor was brought to me. And this time I did not reject him because I thought I was ready for marriage, for all its responsibilities thrown to me. I felt that I was ready to take that roller-coaster ride. I just hoped this time I would make the right choice. I wasn't going to say yes straight-away mind you. Because inside my heart of hearts, I was still scared of the prospect of becoming a sheep for slaughter. But I didn't want to regret it later. And so I thought to go ahead with this proposal. See how it goes.

And there came the man of my life! The man who stole my heart away, at first glance, who made me see stars. Literally! And I am not kidding. He made me feel like I was on cloud nine... if there is a cloud nine! He was so calm and carefree and casual. He was thirty-four (see the age gap) but he looked barely twenty-nine. I loved the company of his family, which is a surprise, you can say. Everyone was so kind and funny and over-the-top. They just made me feel so comfortable and at home. Free, you could say. I was free to speak my word, tell my choices. You could say I was freaked. My stomach was knotted. But what I found so hilarious was he felt the same way, and he was so concerned about my feelings and well-being. It was so gentlemanly. See, I always wanted a guy around thirtyish, or more, because I thought then he would be more mature and understanding. With me being ten or so years younger than him, he would, you know, cuddle me and pet me and not ever be harsh or unkind. And he had a flashy smile and puppy-dog eyes. Who could say no to that? I had to say yes, because we zinged; all the alarm bells rang off. I couldn't refuse now. And so we were married in a beautifully simple and ever cherished ceremony between close family and relatives. And there starts my new life. You would think I would be swooning over him. But to tell you the truth, I wasn't. Not at first. I was always on guard because I didn't want my heart to be broken. Not twice. I was also on a radar, playing and replaying everything he said and did, with my past emotions and experiences. I kept checking him on the checklist of 'the worst guy ever to exist,' or worst husband maybe. Because all my life the biggest example of a husband that I had seen,

was not the best. So you can imagine my animosity towards men and all their activities. But he wasn't in the least near that list. Well, he is way more understanding and caring than I am. But, let's just say that all this crazy stupid love from the guys lasts only until two weeks of the marriage, and then its the women who have to run behind them every single time, begging for their love and attention. The same with me. Because once they do get married, they wish they were free and had their bachelor life back again. Imagine that! We did have our misunderstandings, although I always found it hard to express my feelings; I never liked him being too friendly with other women, even though they were his relatives or family because, I mean, he should at least know that it's not commonplace for me to see such things, where I come from. And me being his wife, I have some sort of right and possessiveness over him. Obviously he wouldn't expect me to do the same with my male cousins. Same goes, doesn't it? Everybody thinks it's funny to talk about my accent and the way I pronounce words. because it sounds Indian (having been educated at an Indian school and all). Well, I am proud to have been educated in a country with diverse dialects and people. At least I don't wear a different accent and pretend to speak in an American or British accent like the people here try to do. I am proud of my accent. The least the guy could do is stand by me when everyone else thinks it's funny to laugh at me. I am not a clown to be laughed at. Just because I don't tell how I feel, doesn't not mean that I don't feel at all.

## **25 years-old**

I finally get a chance to study sewing. It's another step closer to achieving my dreams, and I wouldn't have been able to do this without the help of my husband and in-laws. They are really supportive of me, but it would be nice if he would encourage me once in a while, and let me know that he is there for me every step of the way in achieving my dreams. Men just don't understand that there is someone waiting for them to come home to. They never like telling us where they go; I am his wife, not his car key, (to take or leave). They never think it would be nice to take the girl out to dinners or coffee or picnics or parks, whatever. We never ask for too much, do we? I just want to have some alone time with my man, without everyone tagging along. And why is it demeaning to hold your husband's hand in public? It's not a crime! I am legally married to you. You should have no shame taking my hand and walking with me. We walk together. We are supposed to be one. They don't understand that it gets boring doing the mundane things at home everyday and waiting for your Dearie to come home. But, what do they do when they are home? Jump on the couch and glue their eyes in front of the screen, until it's bed time, with no conversation whatsoever with their

beloved wife. And when the wife tries to please the husband and make different dishes, they have the nerve to criticize every single piece in it. And they just find it annoying when we want to spend time with them. We are here for them and no one else, the least you could do is show us some love. You get to go to work from 9-5 and when you are home, sit and relax and have someone at your beck and call. You get to socialize, spend quality time with your friends, have workouts at the gym, do everything you could possibly do, whether you are married or not. It's us who have to lose all our sense of self and freedom, and compromise all that we have, and all that we do and try to become a completely different person than we used to be. We just forget ourselves to gain the love, respect and confidence from our spouses and their extended families. All you do is completely choose to ignore us when you get home, because you find it nagging to have someone tag along with you. Do you realize, that we wait for your return the whole day, all the while doing the everyday chores and hoping that when you come home you could tell us how your day went and we do the same, and give us a few hugs and kisses and some love, laughter and chit chat? That is all we ask.

## **26 years-old**

We are expecting our first baby. And I must say, that it's not a very wonderful ride. Not that I am not enjoying it. I am cherishing every bit of this moment because I am not sure if I will have another and I don't want to miss a tiny little bit of this feeling and being inside me. I just wish if my Dearie would be a little more understanding towards my feelings and emotions and pains. He thinks that I slouch all day doing nothing. I had morning sickness 24/7 throughout my pregnancy, and I am carrying another being inside me; you can't expect me to be up and running as usual. Babe, you're not the one pregnant. And you wouldn't want to be there. Cut the girl some slack, will ya? I don't even have any energy to laugh. I just want you to be supportive and understanding of my pains and feelings, and not tell me to go home every now and then. I am pregnant with *your* baby not my parents' and so *you* should take full responsibility of me, not my parents. I want *you* to be there every step of the way so you could see and understand what I go through, and appreciate what I do, whatever I do and not expect me to be doing all the work, when I am not able to. I just hate it that everyone expects me to be like someone else. I am weak and I have to accept that. I get tired really fast and I can't work for hours without rest. I am not a superwoman. Please don't expect me to be one. I am me. Just me. I don't lie about the work I do and I don't pretend to have done something that I haven't just to show that I work really hard. But that does not mean I don't work at all. Appreciate what I do because I do it for you.

## **27 years-old**

I went through a lot of depression after the birth of my child and I must say, you have been a gem to me through and through. Understanding what I went through and being by my side and helping me through it all, because some men don't understand what we go through or even give us a shoulder to cry on sometimes. Now the days have become longer and the nights shorter. And I hope you would be there for me through all the sleepless nights and late mornings. I find it really hard to cope with the day to day chores and looking after the baby all at once. It would be nice to give me some encouragement once in a while, show me some love. Having a baby shouldn't make us lose our touch. It has to grow more. I sometimes feel like a failure. That I have not done anything fruitful so far in my life. I am nowhere close to my dreams and I am not even capable of looking after the house and bringing up a child. It would be nice to sometimes let me know that I am not alone in this, and that it's okay to make mistakes. All the fingers on our hands are not the same, which means we don't have to be perfect all the time. We are perfect however we are and it hurts when 'they' question us for everything we do. Like we never do it right. Well there is no such thing as right and wrong. It differs from person to person. It depends on their values and how they were brought up. What we should strive for is never make the mistakes our parents made, or do what we feel is wrong. We have no right to judge people. Nobody gave us that right. To each his own. We shouldn't be ashamed to speak our mind. Of course, the counter reaction wouldn't be too pleasant.

All in finality, I just wish us women would find a best friend in our husbands. Someone who would give us their attention, show us some respect, appreciate what we do and encourage us in achieving what we thought impossible. Be there for us through and through, for us never to feel intimidated or discouraged or ashamed or suppressed to share our true heartfelt thoughts with our spouse.

**“If I know what love is, it is  
because of you.”**  
*Hermann Hesse*

# MARY

Age: 62

Nationality: American

Place of Residence: USA

Having been married twice, my perspective as to what women want from different cultures, although I can't speak about that in great depth, differs from my current marriage. However, I think before one can even begin to discuss these issues, age must be considered.

Back in the early 1970s when I married, as an American, the social culture was to either marry right out of high-school or go to college. I was eighteen when I married, with two semesters of college behind me.

My husband, five years older, was Native American. At that time in America, Native Americans were not as heavily entrenched in their heritage and customs as they are today. However, marrying a man of a different race was significant. Discrimination against mixed-race marriages existed, although more so for Caucasian/African American unions.

At that point in my young life, I wanted someone to be strong, fun to be with and, unconsciously, to take care of me. As I look back, I understand now that I wanted a father figure. At the time, that seemed important; a man who possessed many of the traits of my father. Given my age, however, I now realize I didn't know any better - the perfect reason for women to marry later in life when they truly know themselves and what they want from life.

As we both grew up within our marriage, I realized my husband's domineering personality and desire to control me and what I did, were as much patriarchal cultural traits as they were personal. In my late 20s I no longer wished to be controlled and told what was best for me. Thus, three children and a dozen years later, the marriage ended.

Fifteen years later I remarried. What I wanted in a man and relationship was entirely different the second time around. I demanded respect, expected to maintain my strong independence, and I wanted to challenge a man mentally and emotionally. Being his equal with equality in the marriage, for example sharing household cleaning, joint decision-making, etc., was a must.

It was also important that we developed good communication skills, shared values, respected individuality and each others' opinions, and both have a love of travel with a willingness to experience different cultures and traditions. Obviously, we needed to be compatible and love each other too.

I suppose these prerequisites were so important to me

because I had not experienced them in my first marriage, in addition to the fact that I was a single parent for fifteen years and had become very independent. I learned to do things on my own, and not rely on others.

Communication is one of the most important factors in a relationship. I was frustrated in my first marriage and didn't understand the tension I felt more often than not. I think that had to do with not understanding one another, the other's needs, and therefore, tension, resentment and, eventually, conflict surfaced. We also did not know how to argue constructively.

It has been well documented over the years that men and women differ in areas, such as how they think, react, perceive things, as well as their needs and wants. We are supposed to be different. Men are results-driven and women are more emotionally-driven. Probably one of the most striking differences documented is that men offer solutions to problems and what women want is understanding and comforting - someone to listen and empathize - not to problem solve. We can do that on our own. I know that when I am stressed out, I really do not want advice; I want comfort and a partner who is willing to listen and talk about issues.

My experience gleaned throughout my second marriage is that it is crucial for men and women to understand that each are different. It does no good to try to get a man to think the same as we do. It won't happen. And yes, we are definitely more emotional. Men need to learn our mood swings and adapt to them. And yes, we want to improve things, usually our relationships. Therefore, women need to be careful about criticizing and nagging too much. That will drive a man away into seclusion - either physically or emotionally - quicker than one might think.

I still have difficulty interpreting my husband's silence at times. After nineteen years of marriage, during those times when he becomes quiet, I interpret it as a cold shoulder directed at me. I am still learning that in most situations it is not what I think. Men apparently need their quiet, reflective time whereas women want to talk things out.

There's an American saying: *'Happy wife, happy life.'* That I believe pretty much nails it. I know that I am happy when I believe my husband is doing his best to meet my needs.

On the surface it seems as though this expects a man to uncompromisingly surrender all of his expectations in order to satisfy his spouse. It may seem as such, and maybe even begin that way, but as the years pass and the relationship adapts, I think men actually discover the ease in this give-and-take philosophy.

I also think most men, regardless of age and perhaps number of failed marriages/relationships, think women want to be taken care of financially until they die. In particular, older men worry about a

woman they perceive is after their money in retirement.

During the golden years, as empty-nesters, I believe men truly want companionship and someone to grow old with. I also think women want the same. With shared goals and interests, along with mutual respect and understanding, these years can be wonderful and rewarding. Women know themselves and what their goals/ambitions are. Ditto for men.

Relationships involve compromise. I've found my marriage is a journey of constant discovery and rediscovery. And it does get better with age!

**“We can only learn to love  
by loving.”**  
*Iris Murdoch*

# TONI

Age: 46

Nationality: Australian

Place of Residence: Australia

Gee, I wouldn't regard myself as a relationship expert, or an expert on anything, and I know I still have so much more to learn. Our priorities change as we get older. In our 20s and 30s we're still young enough to mould and morph into someone else's world and hopefully have a shot at making a life with each other. As we get into our mid-40s and upwards, for a female at least, we become so settled within our own world and just accept that this is how we will see out our days until the end.

I was married when I was very young, twenty-three, to a Police SWAT member for four and a half years in all, until I saw the light and left him. My intuition, even in my early 20s, was screaming at me to get the hell out of the marriage. Eventually I listened to it, left him and moved back home. When I was with him, I grew up very fast as I was only mixing with other SWAT team members and their partners and wives. I do occasionally still hear from my ex-husband who, after I left him, got together with a police woman and had two kids with her, but they eventually split up due to his partying ways, drinking and trying to be a hero with his other SWAT team members. We never had kids, thank goodness, but he has since remarried and has another two kids. Basically though, in a very small nutshell, I never remarried and didn't have children, but I don't feel like I've missed out on anything in life; I've travelled and I have my mum to keep watch over now since my dad passed away over three years ago. Because my mum and I actually watched him die at our feet, and the trauma of what happened thereafter, we are still grieving his passing. Watching someone I love die in front of me and not being able to bring them back is the hardest thing I've experienced in my life so far. I guess I will always carry the PTSD from that time and still have triggers that take me back to that night. Maybe I will never get over it.

After losing my dad, my whole world turned on its head and made me realise what really is important in life; it's not money or the materialistic items we collect as we go through life, it's the love and closeness we have with the people who are near and dear to us. That's the secret to life, to happiness: LOVE... genuine, deep, unconditionally LOVE. The type of love where you would lay down your life for that person. Really, I think women just want to be loved, be made to feel secure, protected and cared for in a loving relationship. Someone to be there in the good and the bad times, ups

and the downs. Someone that will listen... and sometimes just listen, without expectation that the man has to go fix the problem, but just to sit and listen. Women are highly emotional creatures and men traditionally are not. I think men suffer a little from the thinking they must fix everything a woman tells them about. Most of the time, this isn't what the woman is after. You know, no matter what relationships you have had through your life, the biggest downfall in most relationships is just a plain old lack of communication. Also, to be genuine in honestly expressing and respecting each others feelings, to really *hear* what the other is saying. Men aren't big communicators and women can't shut up. So there lies the problem, I feel.

I like a man's, man. Maybe the type of man a bit on the rough and rugged side. Not a man that almost faints at the sight of blood from a paper cut, like most office/executive types. However, two most important areas for me would be they have to have a big heart and rate highly in E.I. (emotional intelligence). The strong, supportive, trust worthy, loyal, caring and understanding type I find appealing. Oh, they must love animals too.

Physically, I guess someone tall, reasonably fit and in good shape would be a bonus. At this point in my life, gone are the fairytale thoughts of the perfect relationship with a Prince Charming, one point five kids and white picket-fenced home. To have a companion that fits well with my world that compliment each others' life, really is the ideal at my age.

To be honest, I'm not too sure why men/women sometimes get it so wrong in relationships. It really is an environmental/past experiences/future expectations reason I suppose. First and foremost I think men are initially physically driven towards the trophy type of woman, especially when young and with loads of testosterone running around their veins which, for some men, can last their whole life. They like a trophy girlfriend or wife, and the flashier the better. Maybe this dates back to their caveman days, when cavemen went hunting and caught the best catch and dragged it back to the cave to show their other caveman mates, beating their chests feeling pretty good with themselves and feeling superior next to the next caveman that wasn't so lucky. Some men, over time, see the light and realise that the trophy options was perhaps not the best choice and end up breaking up or divorcing. In my observations, these types of men seem to rectify their trophy choices and go for the home-grown, girl-next-door types, not the flashiest looking but one that will love and care for them until their dying day. Most live happily ever after... well happier than they had with the trophy version anyway.

Looking back now, it seems to have been easier to meet someone and make a life with someone when you are younger in years, rather than mid-life. I get the feeling that most mid-life men have gone through a marriage or several long-term relationships, had

the kids and are now just after either another younger trophy-style girlfriend twenty or so years their junior or, hopefully, someone that will make a good companion for the second half of their lives. And then there are the other types of men that have plenty of money and are too scared to let a woman get close to them for fear of them trying to take half of their wealth.

Or, he's now gay, in which case cancels out all hope of anything!

At the end of the day, I'm no expert on anything really. This is just what I have observed so far in my life's journey on this crazy little rock called Earth.

**“Love works a different way in  
different minds, the fool it  
enlightens and the wise it blinds.”**

*John Dryden*

# ROHINI

Age: 60

Nationality: Canadian/Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

*Finding Love? How does one answer a puzzle that's supposedly haunted humanity from the dawn of time?*

Looking back as I can, to more than sixty years of memories, loves unrequited and imagined, friends and their amours, apocryphal stories from legend, lore and gossip, I do believe that the answer to the question has not been found. How can there be one answer to a myriad minds?

**Look through the kaleidoscope of life. Turn the scope. What do you see?**

The well-known tale of King Arthur, Sir Gawain and the old witch, who ostensibly solved the puzzle by saying a man should:

*"Give a woman her autonomy."*

**Turn the kaleidoscope again and look at it in the mirror of today...**

*What's that autonomy thing? When was it taken from Woman or a woman? And by whom?*

Am I allowed to believe that most modern women, barring those who live in severely disenfranchised communities (and for them I feel we need to campaign), are self-thinkers, self-determiners and strongly independent? It's a feeling I get when I look around and see so many women in so many parts of the world in top jobs, in construction, driving taxis, striding in high-heels and smart corporate style suits as they catch a bus or a train or glide through automatic doors prepared to smash glass ceilings.

Assuming that that is the demographic that we're addressing, the answer is as multi-faceted as women.

I think we all, men and women, go through phases. At some point - once we've moved away from the parental aegis - we rely on someone else. Or perhaps a group of others. Depending on our levels of self-esteem, that reliance could range from self-affirmation through that individual, fitting in with a group we feel drawn to, sometimes subordinating our sense of self in order to find acceptance. And here

is where a problem could begin; if a woman subordinates her 'self' to such an extent that she loses focus of it, then she starts to have issues. Now I'm no psychologist, but through observation of human nature and looking back, clinically at my own life and the lives of those to whom I have been close, I can state that this is the crux of the trouble.

**Turn that kaleidoscope. We have another image.**

Is it love when a woman is so 'in love' with a man that she thinks pleasing him in every way is her *raison d'être*? I've also seen men equally besotted. Is it love when a woman leaves everything that she holds dear to be with one man? Is it love that drives her, or anyone, to pace the street on which the loved one lives? To forget all else and wait only for his call? To be blind to all else and deaf to all other sounds?

That is passion. And it has its place and time, its flaring moment - the firestorm on which many an epic has been written.

The good news is that it's a phase too.

**Put the kaleidoscope away. Look at life in all its beautiful reality.**

Most people outgrow this desperately-in-love passionate phase and learn to start loving themselves. And that, as all the pundits and gurus, Cosmo-type magazines and pop quizzes will tell you, is what you must do in order to truly love another person and realise autonomy.

Now, to the issue of two people sharing a life together. If a man is looking to 'please his woman' through reading a book like this, my first suggestion is change your attitude. She's not 'your woman.' She's a woman with whom you wish to spend the rest of your life. Stop possessing each other and start recognising each other as individuals.

Be honest, but not rude. Sometimes what you say mayn't make her happy, but that isn't the end of your life together. Share your concerns with her. She wants to be a partner. Don't leave heavy decision-making to her alone either. As every self-help column and book states; discuss things together. Don't make decisions that affect both of you without consulting each other. That goes for women and men.

And, as for those joke questions that women are supposed to ask men to which they profess they're so nervous they feel there's no right answer: "Does this dress make me look fat?" If it does make her look fatter tell her. But really look at her and be honest. If it's a

special evening, help her with the decision-making earlier in the day so that you're not going through wanting to say yes just so that you leave the house on time.

And to women I'd say, stop asking men silly questions. If you want autonomy, start making decisions yourself. He looks at other women? Sure! You look at other guys, don't you? You can agonize over this question or keep the following poem in mind...

Khalil Gibran, Lebanese-American artist, poet, and writer on marriage:

*"You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.  
You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your  
days.*

*Ay, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.  
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.*

*Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf  
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be  
alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the  
same music.*

*Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.  
For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.  
And stand together yet not too near together:  
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,  
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow."*

Now, toss a coin. What do women really want and why do men sometimes get it so wrong? It depends on the day, the time of the year, and the time of her life. Your guess is as good as mine!

**“Love is a trap. When it appears,  
we see only its light, not its  
shadows.”**

*Paulo Coelho*

# MAI

Age: 34

Nationality: Jordanian/Palestinian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

I am happily married and living in the hot and humid Kingdom of Bahrain. It's a beautiful island and a great place to start a family... although my Seychellois husband Sam and I are not planning on it anytime soon. Funny enough, although our folks hail from different backgrounds and upbringing, they all seem to unite over one thing - they want grand-kids and... now!

But I digress. The true purpose of this article is to answer an age-old question that has baffled many men throughout the years, and still does today; why do men get it so wrong? If I had a cent for every guy that asked me that question in my lifetime - especially after having a fight with his girl - well... I'd be pretty darn rich right about now.

I keep telling my guy friends that every woman is different and wants different things in a relationship. Intellectual conversation can rank higher on one girl's list than the next. Perhaps another wants someone to be athletic, or perhaps someone to travel the world with seeking out new adventures.

Personally, I want someone who will make me laugh and have my back. Someone who wants to go out and try new things - be it food or outdoor activities - but also someone who doesn't mind staying at home and watching movies all day while wolfing down a giant pizza.

But most importantly I want honesty. Whether the truth is going to make me smile or hurt my feelings... it's the truth, and that is when a guy has my utmost respect. Communication means everything, and to be able to be open and honest with one another makes all the difference in the world. The next step is how to handle the truth. If you go at it alone, it can be bad. However, if you have a partner that will go through it with you, then he is a keeper.

It's not how much money a guy makes, what car he drives or what his family name is (family names are big in the Middle East). It's what's in his heart.

I finally have what I was looking for and that's thanks to my hubby. He is my best friend. That's what we were before we started dating, and that's what we have remained even after being together for eleven years.

When he met with my dad to ask for my hand, he told my dad: "I may not make a lot of money, have a big house or an expensive car.. but one thing you can always count on is that I will

always make her laugh." And I love that!

He makes me laugh even when I'm red-in-the-face-mad at him, which immediately breaks the tension and leaves room for open dialogue. We had major blow-out fights at the beginning of our relationship when we didn't understand what we each wanted. Since then, we have come out stronger and that's because we sat down together and explained to one another why we were upset in the first place, allowing each person the chance to properly speak without being interrupted.

Another example that shows me he cares is when he puts an effort in the relationship. For example, he started eating sushi which may not sound like a big deal, but he was totally grossed out by it originally. He knew how much I loved it and thought it would be another great way to spend time together. Now he can't get enough of it! He opened up to something new. Also, he has never tried to change me. He married me for me and if that means I talk his ear off every day, and sometimes about the same thing, he will still sit there and listen. Also, if I look fat in my jeans... he will tell me the truth, sweetly with a peck on the cheek, and then run away as fast as he can. Out go the jeans because the man was honest and he made me laugh while doing it. Very tactful this man.

So men... that's it in a nutshell; laughter, honesty, being open to new things and, if you haven't figured it out by now, have a big heart.

How do men sometimes get it wrong? I think that's because like I said earlier, every woman is different. Don't assume we are all the same. How about you ask her what she *really* wants and actually... listen? What happens next may surprise you.

How has mine gotten it wrong? I'm happy to report that he hasn't thus far as I'm still laughing.

**“Passion makes the world go  
round. Love just makes it a safer  
place.”**

*Ice T*

# TARA

Age: 37

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

Honestly, we women are simple really, and we just need proportionate amounts of a few things, and a little freedom to spread our wings and grow and flourish, and not be suffocated. We don't want to be timed or to be told who we can or cannot have as friends, or be accused of having an affair just because we have said hello to a work colleague. Total honesty, not flippant honesty because a man think it's what we want to hear. Unconditional loyalty, along with trust and unconditional love. Communication - we want more and to talk more. So, all of the above just in proportional amounts. Oh, excitement in the bedroom too, every one needs excitement, right? For me, I want all of the above in a fella; flexible, loving, caring, honest - all of the things I haven't yet experienced in a relationship. It all looks rather simple when it's written down in black and white, but can you really show the emotion in the written word? Perhaps, but not as well you can with actual physical emotion. That's what I want as a women, but for my individual choice or preference, unfortunately it's not all cut and dry, times change, people change so does expectations and needs.

From my experience so far, I think many men get it so wrong due to them not having a decent father or male peers in their lives when they were young, so they have not learnt the values of good behaviour and acceptable social background influences. I have seen this happen first-hand, several times. My fifteen year-old son now sees my violent and abusive ex-partner as a demi-god and, although his dad set fire to my hair, held me at knife-point and used physical force to beat me within an inch of my life - on a regular occurrence - my son sees him as amazing and is going down the same road as my ex, despite everything I am trying to do to stop it. My ex-partner's father (my son's grandfather) was the same; a controlling alcoholic who beat his wife in front of his children, and so I believe this is learnt behaviour and social background passed from one generation to another that makes men behave like this.

I like to be in control when I am in work, and I work in an environment that can sometimes be violent, so when I leave work I want to go home to a loving but in-control man with no issues, who I can relax with, have fun with, communicate with and share my life and good times with. Sex, for me, is as important as communication, and he needs to be good in the bedroom, good at kissing and, because I keep fit and train regularly, physically fit too. Does it make

me sound shallow? Probably, but then I'm the one who is going to sleep with the guy for the rest of my life so he has to be able to get me all worked up enough for me to want to jump on him! On top of sex-on-demand, romantic date nights, liking what I do but having his own interests too, treating me like a goddess and making me happy... anything else is a bonus!

What I don't want is to go home to a man who has so many issues he takes it out on me. I don't want him to be either verbally or physically abusive, or financially restraining. Nor do I want my mental health to suffer due to a relationship stresses. I don't want to be his launderer, cook or personal hygiene nurse on a daily basis, and I definitely don't want to mother him, and I don't want to hear about his past relationships. Aside from that.. it's simple.

Honest!

**“Never marry but for love; but see  
that thou lovest what is lovely.”**

*William Penn*

# MADHAVI

Age: 55

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

It was an important day. It was a day when mothers are at the brink of collapsing because their daughters are about to deliver their first child. I was one such mother that day, absolutely devastated at the thought that my only daughter was going to go through the pangs of delivering her first baby. However, my daughter was practical and said a definite no to my pleadings to accompany her to the hospital and to be by her bedside, or at least sit in one corner while she went through the expected tough night. But she would not budge. As a desperate resort, I called her husband to the side and tried to entice him into letting me go with her. And then it happened - my clear insight into what a woman might want from a relationship! He said in a very determined tone: "No way mother-in-law! Once my wife has said no, then it's definitely a no, period!"

Dear readers, he had said so when his wife was not even within the hearing range. He said it to unequivocally support his woman who was in that uniquely demanding physical and emotional condition at that point of time. That was the moment I knew exactly what a woman wants from a relationship; a rock-strong man by her side who unconditionally supports her when she needs it the most, and who will not let her down, even in her absence. You see, women are generally sentimental silly-billies, to them, dependability matters much more than a dozen bank accounts. At least, to me it is.

Now the addendum - that apart from the above single point that I plattered out for you, I actually have no clear item on my list of desirables in a relationship. On the contrary, it might prove to be much easier for me to serve you with an elaborate list of what women may *not* want from a relationship.

On a second and more considered thought, I would add that if men give to their woman most of what they give to their non-wife women, that might be of great help. Laughter and interest do rate quite high among those things which women-who-are-not-their-wives seem to get in abundance. I would love my man to make me laugh with or without reason. I would also love my man to notice when I start wearing reading glasses! I would want my man to share that joke with me too, which he forwards by email to the rest of the world!

Then, many men seem to believe that an annual vacation together is their contribution to the relationship. Sigh... to me, it's a little togetherness everyday that matters. Sudden holding hands for no apparent purpose, or occasional offering to iron my dress will be

greatly valued moments of that little togetherness through the year.

Steadiness is another elusive attribute I personally hunger for. It kills not to know whether and when your man would enjoy his hair being ruffled, or his money being saved. If he calls me a dozen times on one day, and then I end up looking at a stiffly silent telephone the following week, it does not particularly cause a flood of love in my heart. Affection-filled glances this month and then a whole row of months without him engaging his eyes with mine. This uncertainty is baffling and nothing that baffles could be comforting.

Of course, there are stages in any romantic relationship. There is that initial bubble which gradually grows into some kind of restless storm; that's when two individuals excite each other the most, and that's when the rest of the world doesn't matter. Their romance is in the ninth month of its pregnancy, fully grown and ready to burst out of its confinement. Now they are the most lovable angels for each other. That's when they notice, remember and celebrate when the other person batted their eyelid last!

Then the storm settles into a comforting affectionate cosiness. This second stage is probably the most cherished; it is now that the two individuals start exploring the realities of each other, albeit positively. They are happy to make adjustments, indulge in little sacrifices and are in that blissful giving state of mind.

The third stage, in some cases, is roughly ribbed and ragged. It is now that the unpleasant possibility of the two of them being complacent is at its highest. It is now when I would want a lot of reassurance that any conflicts would be tided over amicably, that my man would consciously try not to get into the blaming trap, that he would encourage all the good in me and deal with all the bad in me with patience and love. However, I guess it is now that many men do exactly the opposite - probably they feel the need to prove themselves, or to indulge in their mistaken notion of strength and protectiveness.

If my man can tackle this third stage genuinely and lovingly, and be what I mentioned at the beginning - dependable, I wouldn't really bother about any other item on my wish list. The stars in my eyes will twinkle forever.

**“Conquer the devils with a little  
thing called love!”**  
*Bob Marley*

# PAMELA

Age: 31

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Kuwait

"Where the hell are my trousers? Pam, can you please put the laptop in the bag? I am getting late." Arnab was almost shouting on top of his voice. Well, he freaks out almost every morning like this. I speed into the room with his trousers, only to find him in his shirt and socks intently checking some documents. There wasn't any time to even laugh about it. The cab screeched to a halt outside our home and, to make the morning battle worse, Arnab almost dashed out of the room with his trousers in his hand. Amongst all this chaos, as was usually the case I found his cold milk and cereal untouched on the table. I banged the door shut and sat on the sofa. Aaaaah! I heaved a sigh of relief... relief from the chaos for the next ten hours, maybe. I smiled and told myself; *Welcome to Marriage*.

This is usually how my mornings are and I have to retort to power yoga to successfully maintain my peace of mind. Whenever Arnab left for office, there was a strange peace in the house. Well, the peace of the house was normally short-lived as, when I turned around to look at the house, it was soon invaded by my anger. It seemed upside-down. I walked up to each room to check the untidiness; the bed with its pillows and quilt heaped like a mountain with clothes all over, the bathrooms were floating with water... soapy water precisely, toothpaste mercilessly lying in a corner without its cap. And why does the colour of the toothbrush look different? Upon a closer look, I find it was my toothbrush that he was using, while Arnab's one was lying intact in the wash-room drawer.

At thirty-one years-old, being a happily married Indian female, from my view and personal experiences, I can surely certify marriage is a roller-coaster ride. Being married for almost four years, I am still figuring out the magical recipe to a perfect married life (I guess it's a myth which I'm sure many people would agree with). But that's the beauty of this topic; mine is just one of many opinionated posts built to answer a question that a lot of people care about. No breaking news. No science to back it up. Just the right question, and a compelling answer.

While at twenty-seven years-old, I was in a comfortable space in my life, although in India, this space is soon invaded with the pressure of marriage. Here, almost every phase of your life is time-bound to follow certain socially accepted protocols. At first there is the pressure to make a career for which you slog for at least the first few years of your life. Then there is the pressure to get married and

reasons to get hitched are given in abundance by our families, reasons like family simply wanting the girl to get married, biological clock ticking away (it's assumed you're still a virgin), you won't get the right boy as all the 'good' boys will already be taken, and many more. I struggled hard to give myself a reason to get married; maybe the Health Insurance would get cheaper, or maybe it meant more romantic dates and presents, or maybe someone to clean the dirty kitchen after dinner (okay, I am kidding here), or it just might be that it's about time I found a great life-partner for myself. Sometimes I felt life is much easier when you have a boyfriend, but I did not have the time or energy to get a boyfriend for myself (believe me, it needs a lot of time and energy to go out and meet new interesting people and socialise, which therefore increases your chances of getting your Prince Charming, unless until you believe in miracles and your dream man enters your life from nowhere). I looked around and saw all my friends getting married and I could sense the concern from my family members. So, as they say: 'Never say never,' I logically convinced myself that marriage had to be the next thing in my life. Keeping in mind both my deep rooted Indian values and my modern outlook that represented the 'new age' Indians, I finally decided to choose the arranged way of fixing my marriage. Yes, arranged marriages still happen across India! Although times have changed a lot and people in India do choose their own partners, most families are still making choices for their children and one way they are now doing this is through matrimony websites. Though the concept was still 'old' but the treatment was 'new-age.' It was not all that bad, both boy and girl communicate, meet and discuss their criteria. If it's mutually acceptable and suitable, then they go forward to get hitched. The concept is very similar to the dating websites in the West, except for the fact that after discussing all your personal wants and don't wants, you are definitely expected to get married to at least one out of the several eligible bachelors you get to meet!

I definitely wanted someone who should be high on his EQ (Emotional Quotient). Initially it was an ambitious task to even initiate; when you are consciously trying to choose a life partner for yourself, you want the world's qualities in him for example which woman wouldn't want a partner who would sincerely love her, as well as be understanding and supportive? Being romantic and showering his partner with gifts and flowers gets extra bonus points. Which woman wouldn't expect respect for both her and her family members? At the same time though we, as women, want our freedom and space to do our own thing and a partner who encourages her career aspirations and her hobbies is supposedly an ideal man. The list does not end here! Women want men who have a cool temperament and oodles of patience (with patience irritability disappears and listening skills follow). They also want men who give

her his time, and make her feel the sole important living being on this planet. The ultimate man would be someone who is kind, humble and has a great sense of humour. No woman could agree more about the above mentioned qualities that they seek in a man. But what about the poor men out there? What do men really want from a woman? Men are often the scandalized lot who are blamed for trying to seek beautiful women who would be great in bed along with other qualities mentioned above. But aren't we women also seeking the same thing?

Anyway, after successfully feeling like a greedy pig who is in the hunt for the perfect man, I finally decided to treat this entire man-hunting process with a little more dignity. I realized I am not perfect and there is no 'right person', just different flavours of wrong. I have my own set of flaws - every man or woman does - and so I need to find someone whose wrongness complements mine. And so I decided to base my decision on the 'must haves' and 'good to have' qualities (which was basically not discounting any factor but just dividing them into two categories).

Then... Arnab happened to me.

Arnab happened to me when I was least expecting it. We happened to know each other at a time when the feeling of being at loose ends was at an all time high in me; there was chaos in my mind and confusion in my heart, and my life lacked a bit of clarity. This was when fate decided to crawl in my life.

It all started with a matrimonial website message from Arnab which he had completely goofed-up; it was sent to me but with some other girl's name. So first impression about Arnab was, well... not very impressive. Nevertheless, I was curious to know about the goofed-up message, we communicated via the website briefly, he then called me up for a minute or two and we decided to talk for longer later that evening. But there was no phone call after that for a week! Kudos to me as I instinctively picked up the signs of his laid-back nature and forgetfulness (which of course fully came into action after marriage). Almost forgetting about the incident, and him, a week later he called and from then on our conversations started. We liked each other the first time we spoke and so we kept on speaking. Although we knew there was a protocol to be maintained, we spoke for hours which turned into days and then months (by then, all my 'must haves' and 'good to have' went down the drain). I believe you cannot really pinpoint when and why you start loving someone... I guess it is more beautiful that way, when there is no particular reason, but yes, certain things drew me to him. Arnab is a beautiful human being inside out, and the first thing that struck me is his simplicity; he is simple and sweet. He is just a non-complicated and level-headed person. The best part of knowing him was that it just didn't feel that I had known him for such a short period time and I guess we both made each other comfortable. As conversations

continued, which included hours of laughing, joking, sharing and even fighting, I realized we both looked forward to talking to each other every day. And so that's how we met, through an arranged marriage platform, and although it all started with a message from Arnab going completely wrong... nothing felt wrong anymore. I felt strongly that I would love to spend my life with him and somewhere had even started enjoying his annoying ways, his forgetfulness, him being laid-back, and him being just a very genuine and honest person. We eventually met and kept meeting, and it became obvious that for everything in life there is a season, a time and a purpose. We decided to make it official and announced our intentions to start a whole new life together, and our journey thereafter has been a roller-coaster ride encompassing happy times, sad times, silly times and just being-together times.

Over the years, what I look for in a man has evolved. After marriage, more important than love has to be respect, respect for me and my family. People might debate that love and respect meant the same thing, but for me there is a very thin line between both. I believe that where there is respect, there is definitely love, but where there is only love, respect doesn't necessarily follows.

I am a day-dreamer, a true blue romantic, leading a melodramatic life that I fondly call larger-than-life, therefore it's important for me that my partner is high on EQ as I truly believe that when someone is more emotional, then he has the ability to be kind and humble to all. My life has shown me glimpses of the most sincere and loyal people conveniently turning their backs, so for me, sincerity and loyalty from a partner never stood out as separate expectations, but being loved and being loyal were two sides to the same coin. But what is funny is when I met my husband Arnab, I had none of those points in my mind.

What has also changed with time is that now I understand the difference between a funny man, and a man with a sense of humour and I believe that a person with a good EQ also has the ability of having a good sense of humour (although not everyone with good EQs necessarily display their sense of humour).

The real roller-coaster ride begins after marital vows have been taken, and you settle in together with your partner. Soon you realize that marriage is an alliance entered into by a man who can't sleep without the curtains drawn, and a woman who can't sleep with the curtains drawn. It is the alliance between two people; one who never remembers birthdays and the other who never forgets, and one who refuses to believe that the house is in a mess and one who is convinced she is about to faint with its untidiness. That is why marriage is so interesting because it is a happy union of everything debatable and combatable, under one roof.

Arnab and I have opposite nature and habits. As I mentioned

earlier I, being a very romantic person, yearn for those special romantic moments like a kid yearning for candy... yes even if they mean the clichéd flowers, soft music, dinner date or even a meaningful or romantic text message. Every relationship becomes special when a partner does small, little things in everyday life.

I expect my husband to be expressive with his feelings but he, on the other hand, is not very expressive romantically - he feels all this is slightly over-the-top, and believes that not sending messages and e-mails, or not being expressive does not discount the fact that he loves me as much as I love him. He might probably be thinking about me the whole day, but he does not make it vocal and has his own ways of expressing things. He probably won't plan a romantic dinner date, but he excitedly takes me out for a new cuisine or maybe a new food joint. He thinks I am a little dreamer when it comes to matters of the heart, and that the phase of flowers and chocolates are over, but for me, all these mean a lot and will continue being so, no matter how old I get.

I am an emotional person, whereas Arnab is a practical guy. He loves to see things logically whereas I tend to think from the heart. Sometime I secretly wish he wasn't so practical and I would love to see his emotional side a bit more. He on the other hand advises me to be practical in life.

Whenever we fight and make up, Arnab is the one who always takes the initiative to make things alright and apologise, but I take more time to become normal again, as the scar remains. I like to analyse everything and discuss everything before moving on, but he lacks that patience and so extra time and energy is wasted after the fight. He thinks 'bygones are bygones' and so we need to forget and forgive and move on, but what he (and I suppose most men) fail to understand is that his anger and behaviour during the course of the fight stops me from getting normalcy back in the relationship for sometime; I am always expected to immediately cool off without the consideration of my need for time and space to make things better again. Also, things like cleanliness of the house, keeping things in order and doing things in time are few things that I like to follow, but which he does not and these lead to arguments and fights, but the essential factors that holds us together are our core values are the same; we both are brutally honest people, and we are both extremely dedicated in making the relationship work. Sincerity and loyalty towards each other keeps our love intact and we both share a lot of time together doing a lot of things that we enjoy doing together.

I have evolved as a person since my early 20s, my likes dislikes have changed and certainly what I look for in a partner has changed. The requirements of a naïve twenty-two year-old girl vary greatly from the thirty-one year-old old woman I am today.

**“One word frees us of all the  
weight and pain of life:  
that word is love.”**

*Sophocles*

# BRIGETTE

Age: 48

Nationality: Canadian

Place of Residence: Canada

Relationships with the opposite sex can be complex and are rarely easy. Add differences in nationality (British versus Canadian), an age gap and a variety of past individual experiences, and it's a miracle that any of us get along. After much deliberation, I realized that I could fill volumes of books with my perspectives and analysis about issues of being a married woman. A tome wasn't an option, so I tackled relationships from an alternative point of view and explored one aspect of what women want. What follows are three different conversations with three different people: my eighteen year-old son; my nineteen year-old daughter; and my husband of twenty-two years. To protect them from possible embarrassment, I haven't used their real names.

## **Conversation 1: with my son, Scott.**

I'm upstairs. Music suddenly feels like it's surround sound even though it's coming from my son's bedroom downstairs. Scott's choice in music today is more than palatable. Actually, it's quite good. Something from the '70s. I anticipate what the next track will be. The Beatles come on. After several songs, I find myself singing along. I feel transported back in time. I listened to all of this music when I was a teenager. Sweet soulful sad music... Then I realize *when* I would have listened to these ballads. I sprint down the stairs and knock on his door.

"Scott," I say through the door, hoping to be heard over the music.

"What?"

"Are you OK?"

The music is silenced.

"What?"

"Can I come in?" I open the door slowly before he gives me permission. "Is everything ok?"

Scott scowls at me. "I'm fine."

"It's just that the music was rather loud." I say, refusing to tell him what actually tipped me off that things were not 'fine.' I hazard a guess that his playlist has something to do with his girlfriend of three months. "How's Michelle?"

Scott shrugs a single shoulder.

"How are you and Michelle doing?"

Scott's body slumps and his face falls.

"That good, huh?"

"It had been good. Everything had been great."

"Mmmm." I bite my tongue, trying not to divulge that I found the empty box of condoms in his room. "What happened?"

"I dunno." Scott sits down on his bed hard. "Everything was fine one moment and the next she was upset. Now, she's barely talking to me."

"What were you talking about with her?"

"Stuff." This was a typical response from Scott. Grade 12 had reduced his communication with me to the simplest of statements.

"Care to share some details?" I sit down at the end of the bed and place my hand on his foot. I want to show caring but I don't know how hard to push. "I don't need specifics. Just a general idea."

Scott looks at me. I can tell he remembers every word of the conversation he had with Michelle and that he had been replaying it over and over in his mind. Why he wasn't ever willing to share his words and thoughts easily was beyond me.

"I was telling her about my offer to go and play hockey in the States this fall," Scott's sighs.

"So you told her that you are moving thousands of miles away?"

Scott nods.

"And that makes you sad that you are moving far away from her."

He nods again and then examines his hands.

"Does she know how you're feeling?"

A worry line forms between Scott's eyes.

"How is Michelle feeling about you moving away? What does she want? What is she hoping for?"

Scott's head snaps up. "Huh?"

"She must be sad too."

"I guess."

The look in Scott's eyes tell me he hadn't asked her how she felt about him leaving. I press a little harder. "So what are her plans?"

"She'll be at University in Vancouver." Scott shrugs his shoulders.

I nod my head but it isn't really what I had meant. "Ice hockey is your dream. But she must have her own dreams. What are her thoughts? She must be struggling with what she wants to do as well."

It's like the cogs that had been jammed in Scott's brain, suddenly came unstuck. He jumps from his bed, instantly energized.

"Hey, mom. I need to get ready for practice."

I move to get up. Before I get far, Scott's arms are around

me.

"Thank you," Scott says as he squishes me in a bear hug.

Yes, he will need the extra time to call Michelle. As Scott's door clicks shut behind me, the music comes back on. Techno-funk dance music follows me back upstairs.

## **Conversation 2: with my daughter, Alexandra (AKA: Ali).**

I let the car idle in the driveway as I wait for Alexandra. We are late. Again. When Ali does appear, she dumps her belongings over her shoulder into the backseat and then slams the door with such force that the car sways.

"I think I forgot something," Ali says with a harrumph. "Well, tough."

I look at her without taking my foot off the brake or putting the car into gear.

"Why aren't we going? We're late!" Ali is in an animated state.

Her curly hair has an extra frizz; she hasn't yet put her shoes on properly; she has no makeup on; and has a toasted bagel with a single bite taken out of it in her hand.

"I thought I heard you up in plenty of time to get ready for work," I say cautiously. When Ali is upset, she has an unpredictable temper. Full of 'piss and vinegar' is an understatement. While I'm proud that we've raised a confident, assertive, smart young woman, it can come and slap me sideways when I'm least expecting it.

"Ugh," Ali says rolling her eyes. "Nick called me this morning."

Ah, Nick, the boyfriend of over a year. From my point of view, it was obvious that Nick had firmly attached himself to Ali. During the past year Nick has come over for dinner several times and has come over to spend time with Ali regularly, but it has been hard for me to get to know him. Between being petrified of our family and coming by to pick Ali up to go elsewhere, it's been difficult to assess their relationship fully.

"What did he say?" I ask, knowing full well that Nick must have said something to set her off.

"He's upset that Elise is picking me up from work for a girl's evening, tonight."

"Why?" I'm in disbelief. "You've seen him every night for the past two weeks."

"I know, right!"

Taking a breath, I try finding the right words. I don't need to be giving her more fuel. "He obviously likes you very much," I say as I pull out of the driveway.

"It's become a little obsessive and crazy." Ali pulls out her cell phone. "Look at this. His texts are nuts."

I glance over briefly as I drive. Ali scrolls through pages of

texts filled with emoji hearts, kisses and a variety of faces all from Nick. There are very few words. In fact, it was 20-1 for the emojis.

"Wow." I really don't know how to respond. "What's that all about?"

"He doesn't like me seeing my single friends. He thinks they are going to corrupt me and I'll want to be single like them."

"He's that insecure?" The words are out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Maybe," Ali says. "His parents are divorced and his last girlfriend cheated on him."

I nod. This would set the psyche up for a variety of insecurities, but this sudden outpouring of texted emotion seemed a little odd. "Do you really like Nick?"

"I love him."

"And he knows this?"

"I tell him that I love him."

All I can imagine is Ali yelling at Nick saying 'don't be so dense, of course, I love you.'

"You told him about your plans with Elise this morning?"

"It was last night," Ali says. "I told him that she's invited a few girls to the pub. We're going to get a bite to eat and have a few drinks."

"And this is a problem for Nick?"

"He just knows that Elise likes to try to pick up guys." Ali laughs. "It doesn't bother me. I don't know why it should bother Nick. It's not like I'm flirting with other guys."

"Is that what you said to Nick?"

"Kinda."

"What did you say?"

"That he was being an idiot and overbearing. Then he got all sappy." Ali's voice rose as her phone buzzed and another stream of emojis rose from the bottom of the screen.

Rather glad that I was driving, as I really didn't want to read the emotive bombardment too closely, I keep my focus on the road.

"What were his words?"

"He's worried that I'm going to break up with him."

"Are you?"

"No, of course not," Ali sits back to read another text from Nick. "But I will if he keeps this up."

"Have you told him that?"

"Yeah." Ali holds up her phone to show me the text that she sent him. 'Stop it <3.'

"Not explicit enough," I sigh. "You need to stop texting and talk to him."

"But I've told him."

"You've told him exactly how you feel and exactly what you

want or don't want from him?"

"How explicitly?" Ali's face falls.

"Men often decipher mixed messages the wrong way."

"I was trying to be nice."

"Did you tell him that you love him? That you wouldn't purposely do anything to hurt him or your relationship? That the stream of texted hearts is making you feel cornered rather than loved. And that you will see him tomorrow."

I watch Ali bite her lip in concern.

"Go on and phone him before I drop you off at work."

"Exactly your words?"

"Really?" I want to throw my hands up in the air in frustration. "You would tell him what I would say if I was in your position? Please, please, just tell him exactly how you feel and what you want from him."

### **Conversation 3: with my husband, Kevin.**

"Hey, darling," Kevin calls. "Are you in the toilet?"

As I sit on the toilet, I holler back, "I'm not in the toilet."

"Where are you then?"

"I'm in the bathroom."

"No, you're not." I hear my husband say from the other side of the door.

My mind wanders to the conversations with my children about being precise and expressing themselves clearly so there are no misunderstandings. The question was, where was 'here'? I was in the bathroom, kind of, but there wasn't any sink or bathtub or shower in the room that held the toilet located in a closet-like room off the bathroom. So what should this room be called? The outhouse? But it was inside. Maybe it should be called the inside-out-house. "I'm in here."

"So, you are in the toilet."

"I'm in the room with the toilet, but the room isn't called a toilet, the room only holds the toilet."

"Why do you have to be so literal?"

"I'll be right out." I roll my eyes even though I can imagine him looking at the door completely baffled by my comments. Once I'm off of the toilet, out of the inside-out-house and out of the washroom, I walk through our closet (otherwise known as the dressing room or the wardrobe) to leave the en-suite bathroom. I then open our bedroom door out into the living room (or possibly the sitting room or the TV room). On the other side of that is the kitchen. I stop. Is it all considered to be the kitchen or is one side the eating area? Obviously, I am lost in my own house.

"Would you like a courgette for dinner?" Kevin asks.

"A what?" I look up, confused.

"This thing," he says holding up a green vegetable.

"I'd love some *zucchini*," I say, amused that he's used the French word rather than the British word, 'marrow.'

Kevin scowls at me like I've said a swear word.

I try changing the subject. "What do you think of my new skirt?" I wiggle my hips slightly to get his attention. It doesn't take much.

"I love you in that outfit." Kevin takes a step towards me.

I take a step back and tease. "You only love me in this outfit? Not at any other time?"

"You know what I mean."

"Nope," I smile at my husband. "I want to hear exactly what you mean."

Some days I marvel at the fact that we are still married. Many of our conversations are lost in translation. While some interactions have a funny side to them, there have been instances where one of us has said something that really upset the other person. When I get upset, I often find out later that it's because I misinterpreted what my British husband has said or vice versa. Saying things with good intentions is not enough. Communication needs to be thoughtful, kind and precise. A single careless word can cause chaos. Even with good communication, misunderstandings are inevitable. So, ultimately, love must include the willingness to stick with sensitive conversations to ensure that there are no misunderstandings.

**“Where there is love there is life.”**

*Indira Gandhi*

# HEERA

Age: 32

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

"I am really stuck here Heera! I don't know what to do," Rhea told me, staring into her steaming cup of coffee. We were sitting in the backyard of my villa in Bahrain. Our girls were playing some new ball game they had invented. Not the expected beginning of a conversation between two ladies in their early 30s. While we were having this conversation, I never knew that someday I will be the one penning it down for the world to know.

"What is it this time?" I asked her, hiding my smile.

"He never seems to understand what I am trying to say..." she paused dramatically. I remained confused, but didn't dare to ask her who the He was. Maybe, from reading my expression, she said: "It's Nikesh again... Yaar!"

Thank God, she was talking about her husband.

"What is it this time?" I asked her.

"You see, Shradha is almost three now, she is an intelligent girl and I sincerely feel that a little more professional support can help her lots. So I was thinking about sending her to a good pre-school. But Nikesh thinks that it is too early to send Shradha to school, and that perhaps I am considering this idea so that I can be free of my responsibilities. How can he say this like that?" I could see her eyes welled with tears.

I know how much Rhea loves her only daughter and I have once, personally, witnessed her trying hard not to start a fight with the nurses at the hospital as they give a vaccination to the howling Shradha, while Nikesh - the loving father who considers his daughter no less than a princess - waited outside the clinic in the car as Rhea consoled the baby, and they both came out happy.

"Nikesh thinks I am strong enough to handle anything and everything under the sky. I really don't know how to tell him that I really need him to be there for me at times like this. To see my baby crying in pain is difficult for me too!" Rhea had once told me.

"Hmm... please don't mind me saying this Rhea, but don't you think it is too early for school? Shradha is not even three." I asked her, being careful not to give her any perception that I am supporting her husband.

"Why? Don't the working moms in Bahrain leave their kids with babysitters when they are as young as one month?"

"So... you are planning to find a job are you?"

"Yes, I am and I have to. I have already taken more than

enough breaks in my career. And also it will be good for us all to have some extra income coming in. But he says I am thinking too much and that I'm not happy with the care he is providing us. Trust me, I have never thought like that, and I'm sure I can balance my job with my responsibilities as a mother and wife." She looked at me searching for a support.

I couldn't help but agree with Rhea, and I could easily relate to her situation as a working mother. Being an expatriate away from our homeland and loved ones, we constantly face the fear of going back empty-handed to the midst of growing responsibilities. And there are several expatriate families in the Kingdom where the husband and wife work together to set the family wheel running without any stop-overs. She had really put me in a tight spot where I was totally unable answer her.

"Why does he get it wrong all the time? Why doesn't he understand me?"

My land, India, is known the world over for its rich culture and heritage, beauty and the efficient human resource. This is the nation where family ties and moral obligations to society matters the most. It could be between husband and wife, parents and kids, grandparents and grand-children... the list goes on. But even with the so-called metro lives and Bollywood movies influencing the pace of life, we Indians still feel proud to be following the deep-rooted values of living that has been passed down the generations by our forefathers. While remembering our forefathers, our history stands witness when Queen Mira Bai's endless devotion to lord Krishna was never rightly understood by her husband Bhoj Raj the ruler of Chittor. Popular belief say that at all those moments; Queen Mira Bai would cry to her beloved lord: "*Why doesn't he understand me?*" This is just one of a million instances when we, as women, are forced to ask ourselves the very same question. Fortunately, same as the number of questions, there could be equal number of reasons why men fail to get the actual meaning behind what women try to express.

Recently I happened to watch the trailer of a new Hindi sitcom. It had a college girl sharing her jokes over WhatsApp - and her lunch box - with one of her male contemporaries. End of the day the guy actually proposes to her. What I loved the most was the final voice-over which says: "*When a girl shares her happy, or sad, moments with you, your typical thoughts would be that she is all set to marry you!*" And the girl looks at the camera and says: "*Before being someone's wife I want to make my life.*" Bravo! Whomsoever made the script has surely studied in detail, or might have certainly experienced the typical syndrome associate with the Indian male mind.

Even when the whole world speaks about woman's equality, it can never go unsaid that it's a man's world out there. They are the

decision makers, whether at home or in a business environment. Boys are taught: 'Boys don't cry' and 'you are the boss tomorrow,' but seldom are they taught to understand the women around him, may it be his mother, friend or wife.

When men become responsible and feel the power vested on him as the head of the family, and the institution he belongs to, he is equally nervous about the failures that could happen because of his decisions. This is a kind of a pressure situation and, at such situations, men are forced to jump into conclusion over what he might be half-listening to, which in turn may not be something his female support might have even thought of.

Men actually need a support system, whether they accept it or not. They won't sustain without this system, like the oxygen tank that the deep underwater divers carry with them. And in a man's case, it is the women who offer their support. Oh! Please... my knights in shining armour... don't you think twice about what your mom, girlfriend, wife or daughter would say before doing something? Yes you do! And you still get them all upside down. Men need their women to appreciate them, and this sort of gives him the extra life that is required at the next level of life's game.

During the initial days of our marriage, I remember my husband telling me: "Heera... I would really appreciate if you are straightforward in expressing your thoughts to me. I am no astrologer or a mind-reader, and I can't respond to you the way you want me to unless you tell me things direct and not beat around the bush." During those days I couldn't actually get what he was trying to tell. But then, over the years I understood... Oh Yes! The better I explain, the better he understood. It might sometimes be tiring but, trust me, it works really well. And this has been the basic secret of our so far successful marriage. So ladies out there, let us be direct in our requirements. Looks like our poor men find it difficult for their brains to process the inner meaning of the statements we make. But still we can't help asking: Why do men get them wrong?

Doesn't it sound silly that we are asking the same question over time and still finding no definite answer? After having asked the same question many times to myself, the only logical reason I could come up with is that men are not from Mars! They are also human beings, just like us women. The same way we keep them puzzled all the time, they too need the equal rights to ponder with our brains. After all, it is the era of gender equality. It is altogether better than men keep on misunderstanding women; how else can we women get our upper hand on things when we need them done from time to time?

**“The important thing was to love  
rather than to be loved.”**

*W. Somerset Maugham*

# RAZAN

Age: 22

Nationality: Lebanese

Place of Residence: South Africa

Almost everyone would agree that men and women are completely different in almost everything they do, but how different is still undefined for most people. So many people are frustrated in their relationships; they love their partners and would do anything to please them, and make them feel wanted and happy, but as soon as problems or tension come up, our partners seem not to know how to react or make things better. And so, in my opinion, the more we try to understand each other and communicate, the more those frustrations would be easier to resolve.

To be honest with you, I have so many traits that I would like to see in my partner. To start with, it would be amazing if my future husband/partner would be a person that is admired by everyone, and that he knows what to say and how to deliver it at just the right moment. I would love to see that he has similar thoughts and beliefs as me. I would love him to be respected and well-mannered in society, strong and generous in his love, a listener to the point where I can share anything and everything with him, and be willing to learn to listen when I need someone to talk to. I want to be able to share my thoughts and express my feeling freely, without him judging me.

The most loving thing for me is to know that my partner is always there for me, supporting me and willing to push me further to achieve my goals. That would make me feel on top of the world. And when he accepts that I have my own personality, my own impact on society and in life in general, that would be beyond happiness.

These things are so important to me as an individual, they would make me feel so special. I need to feel special, and need to know that the person I choose is willing to stand next to me, through bad or good times, and he is willing to treat me differently to any other women. I would certainly love and trust him and, most importantly, I would be more than happy to live with him for the rest of my life. I think that, as time passes and my partner and I share more and more interests, things will get easier and even better. I will feel happy. I will feel relaxed, and I think arguments will be less because we understand each other deeply; if my partner is more like me, misjudgement and offensive attitude would disappear. I think that if my partner is similar to me, I'll be more willing to talk honestly and open up easily. Happiness and love is my thing - if I'm not feeling happy I'm easily broken.

Secondly, I think men get it wrong because of our phrase of

words, or the way we women talk to them. If there is a problem and we need to fix it, men assume that we are blaming them and not accepting or appreciating them. Men think that women are too emotional, and so they hide behind our emotions and when they don't reply honestly because of our emotions, they think they are doing a perfect job!

Some men think that the more they are full of themselves, and the more they are showing-off or being arrogant, the more it will make them admired or attractive to women! Not by me! Also, mysterious men are admired by many women, but unfortunately not by me either! Arrogant men or the showing-off type are such a turn-off for me; men that try to make me feel that they're better than me, or trying to show me that they are the most important thing on earth. Men that tell the world about their brand new cars, or posing everywhere on social media in their new *Nike* shorts! These are not achievements a real man should be so proud of. It's about attitude and the way a man deals with things; the more humble he is, the more admirable he will look,

A man needs to understand that I'm a lady. I may talk differently and in more detail, my voice may get higher when I am excited about things, but that doesn't mean I don't respect him or that I am trying to annoy him, it is just what we women do when we are trying to express ourselves! A man doesn't really need someone to turn to when he's upset, but a woman, on the other hand, does need to turn to others when she is upset or feeling sad, and sometimes we just need someone to tell us what to do, or what not to do.

I do like the idea that we women are emotional creatures, and that our decisions are mostly taken through emotions, how we feel about another person or someone from the opposite sex, but that doesn't mean men can freely use our emotions against us, or to hide things away from us. Saying something to me just because I am emotional may give me some temporary relief, but ultimately using my emotions to hide behind would give me a feeling that I'm weak, and of distrust, and I would worry if I sensed such things, and getting a minimal answer to everything would be the worst feeling ever. I want me and my partner to share thoughts; I would like to hear his thoughts about things, and I'd like it when my feelings and thoughts about things are taken into consideration too, and if I can get all of the answer I need, I can sleep well at night because I have someone in my life who understands that I have the right to know everything.

In summary, the more we communicate and talk openly about our feelings, thoughts and concerns, the more we can heal them, not just in relationships but with everything! I tried to talk openly here about my opinions on men and relationships, and I don't mind the world knowing them, but this only touches the surface; I

can write so much more!

Falling in love is like spring time; we feel that we are going to be happy forever and we often forget that we are not perfect, mistakes will show up and the only thing is to have patience and to work on the relationship. This, in my opinion, is the key to real and lasting happiness.

**“True love brings up everything -  
you're allowing a mirror to be held  
up to you daily.”**

*Jennifer Aniston*

# RACHAEL

Age: 37

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: Wales

Hi, I'm Rachael. I'm a very straight, single, thirty-seven year-old British female. I have lived in the United Kingdom all of my life and up until recently have spent the majority of my life in Llandudno, North Wales. I have no children, I have never been married and I have never been engaged either. The longest relationship I have had was twenty months, when I was in my early twenties, and it was the most serious relationship I had to have to date too.

Because my parents were very strict and would not allow me to have a boyfriend, my first relationship was when I left home, when I was around eighteen years-old. In hindsight, this relationship was fantastic and was the best I have ever had, the only reason it broke down was because he was setting up a business and did not have time for me, which I completely understood. The next relationship I had was with a work colleague in the police - the one which lasted twenty months. We had a house together but unfortunately for me at the time he had an affair, so naturally the relationship ended because clearly there was no trust and I no longer loved him. Also, he was sleeping with someone that knew about me being his girlfriend and us having a house together, and yet that did not deter her from ruining my life. That was my first real experience of being lied to, cheated on, and my whole world falling apart. Everything he said to me was a lie. I don't know why he cheated; he said he loved me and he cared for me, but he was no longer in love with me. I didn't just lose my lover but my soulmate, forever. I saw several different guys in the police after that, always remaining a one-man woman, and I have to say that none lasted very long, mainly because I did not trust anyone. People working in the emergency services are well-known for having affairs and I have seen it in just about every emergency service and from the recruitment stage upwards to the very top, until the point I left the police eight years later. It didn't matter if people were married, or just had a baby, or just moved in together, from my experiences the vast majority are completely Jekyll and Hyde, and I have no respect for most of them.

All I have ever wanted was to get my education, my career sorted, and then be with a guy, marry him, settle down and have children, and to live happily-ever-after. My grandparents were married for over sixty years until they both passed-away in there late eighties. They had highs and lows, but they stuck together through thick and thin, because they always worked things out, they

understood one another and they never strayed, and for that I have great admiration. However, my parents divorced when I was nineteen years-old, partly because of my father's affairs, and I remember being as young as seven seeing my father with another woman, which was apparently one of many. Anyone who has experienced an affair would understand how brutal and how lethal the consequences can be and, in my opinion, anyone who has played a part in having an affair with someone should be shot. Affairs destroy lives. Period.

What sort of man am I looking for? Well, he has to be taller than me, he has to have good skin and white teeth, he has to do his hair nicely and wear aftershave and be well groomed. He has to look after himself and dress well, because if he doesn't look after himself and if he isn't happy with himself, then that indicates to me that he won't look after me and won't care for me as well as I care for myself. I wouldn't date a guy that is young enough to be my son, or old enough to be my father because on both counts I think that is wrong. Culture is important and I have tried dating guys of all ages, and all walks of life, and personally I have learnt that British men do not treat British women very well! I have been emotionally, mentally and physically abused in relationships and I swore that this would never happen again.

Because of the way I am, and my lifestyle choices, I'm very direct, very fast and furious, and tend to live for the moment. I think a lot of men tend to feel inferior to me because I have done so much in my life and I strive to do more, and so they feel inadequate, or I tend to attract parasites; guys who just want my money or my body. I spend most of my time in the gym, or working, or doing courses, and I don't have time to go out socializing and I'm not a big drinker, and so I would need a guy who has a lot of patience and understanding because my whole life revolves around being successful, making money, maintaining my health and striving for fitness goals which includes competing in Bikini Fitness modelling, and so I would also need a guy who trains at the gym at least six days a week and ideally would be my training partner if he can. I have a very strict regime and I cannot be with a guy who drinks or smokes, and isn't disciplined in his health and well-being.

I need a guy who understands and supports me, as I would him. Ideally he would be ex-military so that we have that understanding, and I don't even mind even if he is still serving. He would have to be intellectual, and by that I mean engage in stimulating conversation with me about anything and everything, and most importantly know how to have fun. I don't just want a guy who looks pretty, he's got to have substance and I've got to feel drawn to him. Even though I am seriously independent and I don't rely on anyone for anything, in a guy all I would ask is that he is loyal, patient, understanding, passionate, romantic, and give me all the

attention that he can.

I am traditional and I do believe that men should make the first move; an alpha male should always show an interest in a woman he likes and men... if you don't ask, you don't get, so, if you see a pretty girl just ask her out! The worst that could happen is that she's going to say no, but at least you tried.

I believe you have to be able to love yourself before you can be loved, and you need to know who you are and where you are going in your life. Without these it is almost impossible to have a meaningful relationship.

In a relationship I expect loyalty, expect communication and conversation, and I expect an activity partner so we go and do things together in our spare time and build the foundation for a future. If you don't have communication you don't have trust, if you don't have trust you don't have respect, and if you don't have respect you don't have loyalty, and without any of these things you don't have a relationship in any shape or form.

If someone doesn't support me as I would support them, I don't tend to stick around for long because I want a man who will be loyal, who will love and support me and not take advantage of me. I don't need negative people in my life, I don't have time for that. I am a very positive person and always try for the best and I'll always support those in my life who are the same as me. Marilyn Monroe hit the nail on the head by saying: *"If you cannot love me at my worst, then you sure as hell do not deserve me at my best."*

Us women want to be wooed. We love romance, thrills, adventure, gifts and surprises like weekends away in romantic locations, as well as just enjoying each others company and doing normal things too. Make good memories together by having fun times and being able to laugh a lot. It shouldn't matter where you are in the world, but as long as you are together, that is all that should matter.

**“Is love supposed to last  
throughout all time, or is it like  
trains changing at random stops?  
If I loved her, how could I leave  
her? If I felt that way then, how  
come I don't feel anything now?”**

*Jeff Melvoin*

# CHARLI

(not her real name)

Age: 44

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

I have been in love, let down, lived to love again... I don't know why men don't get it, maybe they do, but their pursuits lead them elsewhere, or maybe some are not brave enough to share their true feelings and so have their moment of happiness, and then carry on doing what they think is expected of them and they like to think what is expected is whatever pleases them at that particular time. I hope that doesn't sound bitter, it's more of an observation.

I think women analyse and think about what they want and what things mean, I know I do... I maybe think too much. But in my experience, the men in my life have lived in the moment of gratification and not worried about the consequences... until they have to be faced. I have, of course, been guilty of this too.

I was invited to collaborate on this fascinating topic about men and relationships at a time when I had a transatlantic flight looming. And so I thought Hey, why not? As my trip from the UK is relevant to the topic anyway; I am on a US Airline flight on my way to Vegas to meet with, who I thought was The One until a few weeks ago when I had to question why had I got it wrong... again?

However, my commitment to my pursuit of happiness motivates me to go with the extravagant gift of flights and a week at *The Mirage*, with tickets for 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks, *Boys2Men*, and a hypnotist I have wanted to see for some time. Perfect Right? Vegas has been on my bucket list for a number of years and never quite happened, so I'm going on my first ever all expenses paid trip (by any man) purchased, I guess, as a make-up gift? God only knows if he actually loves me and if he knows what he wants and is prepared to do what it takes to get it? But he's made a good start with this trip!

So, what does this particular woman want? First, I think monogamy. To be in love and be loved. To be enough for that one man who you think is the single most amazing being on the planet. To respect and to be respected. I want to look after my man and to be looked after and feel safe and protected. Is this the same for every woman? I don't think so, it's changed for me at different times of my life, but I am not your average woman in any way, shape or form, but as life bobs on, that craving for the ever elusive relationship and love are playing an increasingly important part in what I want in my life. This morning I saw a seventy (plus) year-old couple walking, holding hands, chatting and laughing out loud, then embracing and

kissing, followed by a love filled gaze that will live eternally. So I guess seventeen or seventy, I think that is how it is meant to be and I want to feel just like that as I go about my everyday life.

I have had a full life; four amazing children, one of which is now creating the next generation. As of thoughts of their dad? I have none these days, but I adored him for a time but things were not that good, even back then. It was some two years after we split, I discovered by chance he had another relationship - before we were married, but which had continued once we were married. He was possessive and aggressive in private, but publicly always generous and attentive. Hindsight is a wonderful thing; all the signs were there of his infidelity that I did not want to acknowledge. Hey, I have no regrets about the fairy-tale wedding and, without my very annoyingly funny first born, my little people who light up my life today would not exist.

My second husband was younger, taller and very handsome at the time, and this I feel sure would have been forever had it not been for his indiscretions. The first eventually forgiven, but love is tainted after hurt, and when it happened again some several years later, I felt absolutely nothing for him other than: 'this is done for good!' It had hurt so much the first time that I had toughened and the second time got me to a *can't beat 'em, join 'em point* in my life! My business was good, I didn't need financial support, but I still wanted then - and still do now - to be loved and respected.

I have no regrets about my previous relationships and I now have four children, none of whom were planned, but they enrich my life in many ways and give me reason for being.

I think that women want that fairy-tale, and men like to be the hero; women will always crave it and men will always seek the adventure. But this is not sustainable throughout the normal lifespan of relationships, but I am still hoping my next hero can manage to sustain the adventure, and throw in monogamy to boot!

**“Love is all we have, the only way  
that each can help the other.”**  
*Euripides*

# MARY ANNE

Age: 50

Nationality: Maltese

Place of Residence: Malta

Writing about love and relationships is not easy, but at the same time it is the most interesting topic hitting women of all ages and from all walks of life. For loving relationships are an integral part of a woman's life. At the same time relationships do not always turn out right and are often a source of pain and frustration. Much has been said and written about relationships, in film, in media, in books, with the sole aim of untangling this web.

Going back in time, precisely as a young girl I found myself being absorbed in fairy tales and fables which introduced me to the dream of perfect love. Most of the time, these fairy tales portrayed situations of young women waiting for their Prince Charming, the Knight in Shining Armour. There is one thing which is always definite in these fairy tales; the end is always a happy one... *And they lived happy ever after*. So naturally we believed them. Enchanting, magical stories which have remained engraved in my memories. Before I knew it, I found myself dreaming of meeting the Knight who would make my life whole. The result turned out to be different as I imagined. Later, in my life, many men came, but they did not fit the image of the Knight or Prince as portrayed in fairy tales. On the contrary, I experienced disappointments, pain and frustration. Unlike my favourite fairy tales.

In truthfulness, behind the stories of Knights and Princes there is another reality. We can see that the woman who waits patiently for her Knight is entirely submissive and relies on her spouse or lover for all that she wanted or needed. At one point we all fell for this dream, and waited for the Prince to come into our lives and fill our life with utter happiness. And that sort of thinking instilled in us the idea that loving your man meant being everything for him. Our life revolved around our Prince and, as it seemed, a life without our lover or love was meaningless. Most often, a woman had no value unless she had a husband or lover. That was how we were conditioned to think. Thank Heavens we have evolved and we are now living in our times where we are more in control of our lives and in finding love.

## **Both men and women want love**

There is no doubt that both men and women yearn for love and want relationships that work. As for myself, I do not want a perfect man,

but a man who can understand my journey and purpose in life and walk with me along the path of life. Subsequently, women like me also want emotional security, perhaps the inner feeling that the relationship is leading to somewhere, and that it is working. In other words, the reassurance that it is worth investing in someone on a deeper emotional level, superseding the fear that after getting emotionally involved the man will break up. But for all that, men do contribute differently in relationships and which, on many occasions, lead to misunderstanding. And it may not be their fault at all, but their different emotional constitution and conditioning.

I will explain.

As from the early years in history, men took the roles of hunters and were often responsible for the village or community, while women took the caring and nurturing role, particularly that of mothers. The hunter was important, as he had to exert himself for his quest of providing for his family and the community. As far as I can see, men have remained hunters and have retained this primitive instinct. In relationships, men still want to conquer and protect and since women have progressed, this is generally causing misunderstanding and frustration for women. Moreover, even in certain cultures, women were often viewed as frail, submissive and who need to be protected while taking care of the family. Given this kind of framework, love relationships did work. Consequently, my feminist thinking leads me to think that relationships succeeded because women lived up to this dream in silence. This was followed with more reprogramming systems of women being submissive to men.

Beyond questioning, there are existing differences in men's emotional make up and even upbringing which nevertheless affect the way men behave later when in relationships with women. From their early years girls learn to express their emotions more freely, even in public. But for men the situation is somehow different, as men were brought up to suppress their emotions, later affecting their communication with women. The consequence is that women feel that they are not understood and loved by their men.

### **The dream has changed into women's progress**

So far, thanks to women's movement and emancipation, we have travelled far from the usual fairy-tale, to that of equality. I consider myself lucky to be living in these remarkable days where we are confronted with new possibilities and opportunities. This entails working in careers, jobs and in professions which were generally reserved to men. This was a developing milestone in women's history. We women have finally endorsed equality and equal access to success like our counterparts, men. Fair enough! Solemnly, women have

climbed the ladder of success and moved away from the long years of submission and suppression. Nonetheless, it felt good to be equal to our male partners giving us identity and new perspectives in life. Yet, as much as we have achieved in our career, our relationships with men took a different facade. This renaissance was instrumental in giving women financial and social independence.

Women no longer dream and wait for Prince Charming to come and provide for them. More and more women are relying on their resources and practicality for all their needs, and in return the need for love differed from its original departure. Even though women are strong and equal, the relationships with men are still problematic. And I ask how come that women who have it all, are successful in all ventures - even more than men - and yet are still dissatisfied in their relationship?

It is undoubtedly visible that success and new ventures in careers have made us more self sufficient and more autonomous. In the meantime, financial protection is something we can achieve ourselves rather than wait for our spouses or lovers to give it to us. I dare say that this radical change has created a sense of delusion and confusion in men, where they have seen change in our roles and way of life. I must say that few women have still remained dependent on men and living under the shadow of men; we can now get everything we need by ourselves, but is this affecting our relationships with men?

Another aspect is that of power; women are now working and gradually adjusting to power, a concept which has been for long associated with men. Steadily and surely, women moved from the submission mode and became more equal to men. And men? My discerning feeling is that men have remained hunters and protectors attached to cultural expectations. So, what needs to be done in this situation?

It is now a man's turn to learn to adjust to the now role endorsed by women and get accustomed to having women as their partners in power. On top of all that, men need to progress and shift from role of protecting women and start seeing them as equal partners. It is not uncommon in relationships for this level of protection to escalate where men become possessive, domineering and in certain cases even resorting to violence. This could be due to cultural beliefs of how women should act in society and lack of adjusting to the rapid change in women's roles. Still it may not be men's fault but rather the effects of this paradigm shift.

It will change, and I am hopeful that by time this will take a new turn. There is no doubt that men are loving and want nothing more than to care for their beloved. What differs are the paths taken to lead to one destination. Love.

So, if we want to embark on this journey, we therefore need

to reach balance and then the road ahead is not at all impossible.

### **What do women want?**

Women want to be respected and appreciated for what they have become. We could proudly say that a woman's journey towards power and equality has been unduly successful, but with more measures to be taken when it comes to love and relationships. It all boils to the fact that women are relying on themselves completely and in terms of relationships; what women want is to be treated with equal respect and to be given space, to balance between her career, family and love. Equality is the key component. In addition to that, women need a man who can support the way and manner through which he can channel his energy into his world. What we want is a man whom we do not wish to change, and love the way he expresses himself to the world and that he supports our way we bring our energy.

So, women wait for that man and, in the long term, it will pay its rewards. Women need not remain tied to the idea that we are nurturers and that of anticipating the needs of our partners. All in all, what women want from men is respect, friendship and communication and in a relationship where they feel loved and treated equally. My answer is that women need to respect more themselves and select a man who can support their growth and development. The dynamics are shifting and, by time, women will achieve this equality.

**“Smart women love smart men  
more than smart men love smart  
women.”**

*Natalie Portman*

# SHEEJA

Age: 28

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: India

If we could read minds, humans could be spared so much heartache. If we are all human, and feel the same emotions, then why is it said that men are from Mars and women from Venus? Are we really that different? Yes and no. Men feel and emote in different ways than women and, compared to men, women tend to be more emotional. Some men express what they truly feel, however most lie. It is not as if women do not lie though, we sure do, however I guess the reasons we lie differ, and I feel men tend to lie about what matters to them; their family, friends, likes, dislikes etc. The basic difference between men and women in this regard is that women can normally make out when a man is lying, but not many men can see through a woman's lies. I know some women though who will accept the truth and yet live with the lies dished out by their partner, as long as the status quo is maintained and the fear of facing reality reduced. The ability to tell the truth, without sugar-coating it, and the strength to take the truth with all its bitter-sweet aspects, is what I feel is needed for a relationship to sustain.

I also feel that, when in a relationship, we basically give our partner a roadmap to our injuries, scars and hurt, with the trust that they will not hurt us anymore. However, the reality is that they use that very roadmap to draw blood, repeatedly so, and this act of repeatedly hurting us and hitting below-the-belt is what eventually kills whatever little chance the relationship might have had.

Many men forget that we are human and they expect ultimate stoicism from us women when faced with the harsh judgements given to us by our in-laws. Not once did my husband stand up for me when I got taunts from my in-laws about my skin colour (my mom wanted me to go for a chemical peel after my first child to please my in-laws), and my skinny physique and lack of good looks, and even my ability to pick up their language, cooking and culture was of no consequence to them. And the comments about me when I put on weight during my pregnancy were the heights of ludicrous. I was aghast that my parents too, openly supported what my moronic in-laws wanted. I quit my job as an undergraduate lecturer to look after my father-in-law and his much older siblings and, for six years, I bent over backwards trying to please a group of people who would have been happy to see me dead. For what? My skin colour!

When I was carrying my second baby I saw no improvement in their attitude and so I finally decided it was time I moved on from

this horrid little state in India, set in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with its silly rituals and fear of God; if one is honest and sincere in all one does there is no need to fear a God, and nowhere does the definition of an atheist equate to immorality.

So what exactly do men want in a relationship? I feel a lot of them want nothing but eye candy; if what is holding on to their hand is soothing to the eye of another, then nothing else matters. And sometimes I think that men marry plain Janes for a licence to bird watch; it is as though they feel they have some legitimate right to.

All relationships should start with the same premise; love, respect and a need for companionship, with love being the underlying thread that holds everything together. However, when one looks at the way a relationship ends, it shows such varied hues. Rare are those who look beyond the need for genuineness, understanding, caring and intelligence; most men get scared and run, especially when they see intelligence and independence in women (although they would all love their partner to contribute to the family finances). Intelligence is always suppressed, and a lady with a mind of her own?

Ahh... you best be single!

**“Love is a portion of the soul itself,  
and it is of the same nature as the  
celestial breathing of the  
atmosphere of paradise.”**

*Victor Hugo*

# JENNIFER

Age: 88

Nationality: Australian

Place of Residence: Australia

A hasty fumble with a drunken sailor in a back alley, or the foundation for a lifetime partnership? Same ingredients ... ?

Sex, money, mindset – it's a lot to get your head around. I had a friend, a doctor's wife, who was explaining to her thirteen year-old daughter the facts of life (a bit late, in my opinion). This child, with her head on one side and a suitably puzzled look on her face said: "I don't quite understand, could you call me in when you and daddy do it so that I can watch?"

Seriously, no one can truly understand another's financial arrangements, let alone their mind-set or sex life, though that doesn't always stop them meddling, or criticizing. We must learn by observation and osmosis, mostly from our own parents, though perhaps not necessarily in the way my friend's daughter suggested.

My mother had a challenging life and it was my father's tender heartedness and her own sense of humour that saw her through. In her 90s she underwent the indignity of a rear-endoscopy and this frail old thing, looking and sounding very much like the Queen Mother, remarked quietly to the astonished crew: "I can't think how buggery ever caught on." Slaying the dragon.

My father was explosive at times and as quite a young child I remember wondering vaguely if the parents were going to get divorced - and whether it would be my fault. I needn't have worried. The marriage lasted well over sixty years. This from my 'thank you' speech at their Diamond Wedding celebration: "*We are glad that you have passed on to us an eye for quality and good lasting characteristics that came in useful when we chose our spouses - or perhaps, since we weren't so very liberated in those days, when we allowed them to choose us. The idea that marriages are not made in heaven but are made through solid loving care over many years, is basic to our lives... also the gift of communication. You probably know the one about the waiter who said 'You can always tell the ones that aren't married, because they're talking to each other.'* This is not so in our family, as our nearest and dearest can testify. My mother remarked to me the other day that '*we still talk as much as we did when we first met.*' It's true. And this is something to be grateful for." John had proposed marriage to her on his fifteenth birthday and they waited (and in those days that meant waited) until after his finals to get married.

*"There is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends."*  
Homer (and that's not Homer Simpson!)

Sadly, the reverse is all too common. By the time you get to my age, you will have heard a good many unhappy relationship stories and have begun to characterize them in your mind, Cliché it may be, but compatibility is what it's all about. The sine qua non of relationships. And that means sharing worldly goods too. Leave financial transactions to drunken sailors and bankers.

Does it all begin and end with sex? Even advertisers have moved past putting leggy girls onto the bonnet of the latest motorcar. Ads have moved on through a 'you deserve it' phase to nice warm fuzzy feelings with a touch of competition thrown in. A good sign? My computer has stopped offering to extend my penis – sorry but I don't have one – now asking why men won't commit, and the intriguing information that Hitler had deformed genitalia. Strangely enough, a music hall ditty of 1939 got that right, or partly right. The reason for that phallic salute? And much else besides.

Can those in the grip of the sex drive understand it? Does distance lend enchantment to the view, in that perspective provides greater understanding of the erotic, romantic, sentimental aspects of life? Does ready access to pornography, even paedophilia, lessen or enhance the drive for the real thing? Will robotic sex do likewise?

Unless my dictionary and memory are serving me wrong, relating means carrying baggage and many people try to bear the unbearable for far too long. Unwanted and unwarranted lifelong guilt has destroyed many relationships. An ex-partner surprised the one who had given him marching orders by observing that she looked well: "I held you back, didn't I?" The first insightful thing he had said in decades. Too true and too late.

*They were a prickly pair, for better and much worse,  
he so macho, she so the reverse.*

Unless you happen to be a magnet, opposites do not reliably attract. Or rather, they may attract, but seldom have good sticking power. I believe you have a better chance if you are of like mind – *'somebody kind who touches your mind will suddenly touch your heart'*. Hammerstein is a bit of a Shakespeare, in that he not only had a way with words, but in *The Sound of Music* and other musicals, his lyrics moved us a long way from the moon in June. In the same show he touches on the psychological, writing that *'nothing comes from nothing ...'* and that even those with *'a miserable childhood ... must have done something good'* and I (Pollyanna as always) feel that if

those miserable little men can seize the good, small though it may be, and build it into their future, all is not lost. I just don't want me or my daughter or granddaughter to be the ones to help them do it. Safety first in the balance between the empathic and quixotic.

The trophy bride is not a new phenomenon, but I hear mothers bewailing how their beautiful, well-educated and high-earning daughters are wooed, captured, ill-treated in various ways and then dumped, if they haven't been brave enough to do the dumping themselves.

And what of female behaviour that breaks up relationships? Sheer boredom sometimes. The roving eye is common to both, but opportunity lies with the boys. From where I sit, it usually is the men at fault, but pub talk would say different. The answer to most of the trouble is to choose sensibly in the first place.

So what should we look for in a spouse? Humour always comes high on the list of desirables. Not a bad place to start, as humour is all about perspective. It doesn't really matter who does the cooking, or who doesn't put the cap on the toothpaste tube if you can share a laugh.

Lived experience: by sheer force of circumstance, my lifelong partner and I had an airmail friendship not long after we first got to know one another - letters winging their way between continents. I have them still. Thinking about it now, I can see that letters can be a window to the soul, to that sense of proportion that betokens humour and honour, to a mind-set that adds up to a decent and intelligent human being. Such was James. Wasn't I lucky? One such letter castigates me for not writing unless and until I received a reply: *'A bit hard for an overworked chap like me ... I do enjoy them so, and you enjoy writing, so why not let us both be happy?'* He goes on to wax lyrical about England in springtime: *'... splashes of colour. It is all rather seductive and one feels like rolling in it.'* Then a couple of pages of comment and analysis regarding my letter, and concludes *'I'm going out to roll on the grass'* and *'PS It was wet.'*

By the time we had discussed books we were reading, and what was happening around us, we didn't need questionnaires to test compatibility. Many years later, those 'tests', such as MBTI (*ed: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality tests*), confirmed what we already knew. They are readily available on-line now and one could do a whole lot worse. A bit of research might spare one from a lifetime of regret. Why did The Palace fail so badly with the ill-fated Diana? A little less concentration on dynasty and a lot more consideration of character was needed...

That said, electronically screened pushes about how to get your man and how to enhance virility and the cheekily named women's libido, may not be the best answer. There is a lot more to relationships than fluttering eyelashes and a leg-over.

As usual, Shakespeare said it all:

*"Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds ..."*

**“To love with the spirit is to pity,  
and he who pities most loves  
most.”**

*Miguel de Unamuno*

# KAREN

Age: 40

Nationality: British

Place of Residence: England

When I was twelve, my favourite book about love and relationships was Jane Eyre. I loved the Gothic moodiness of Mr. Rochester. I found the way he barked at Jane, but craved her company and admiration quite sexy. An experienced older man who wants the love of a shy eighteen-year old. Now, looking back, this seems slightly strange...

*Mr. Rochester's dark, brooding looks (although we're told he is not handsome) reels the reader in. Why does Mr. Edward Rochester need the love of Jane Eyre? Jane shows she is a lonely creature; she loses her family and her one good friend Helen, while they're both at school. Her Aunt Reed is cruel and unkind, and her cousin is a bully. Jane shows an indomitable spirit. She forges a career as a governess and wants the best for her charge Adele. She thrives because she is needed and can share her passions; art, with the child. Finally, she has a home and a place. However, cruelly Mr. Rochester dangles Miss Fairfax in front of Jane's nose, implying that he wants to marry her. Jane experiences jealousy and realises she must love Mr. Rochester. This is a new and rare emotion for Jane because she's never had anyone to love before. She agrees to marry Edward and they rush to the church to pledge their vows. However, an unwanted intruder arrives and announces that Mr. Rochester is already married to his sister, Bertha, who lives in the attic because she is mad. Edward's flaw is revealed to the reader. He is in love with Jane who is good, innocent and kind. Bertha represents the darker sides of his own personality. The madness which lies within his own psyche. He selfishly tries to take Jane's love dishonestly. Jane runs away and finds she has family: three cousins who are interested in the church. Jane is offered marriage to her cousin and has a chance to become a missionary. This is a good life but she can't shake the passion she feels with Edward. Hearing his strident cry of her name echoing across the moors, she knows she must go and find him. An instinctive need drives her to return to Thornfield, the home of Edward. Thornfield is in ruins, practically burnt to the ground. Mr. Rochester is blind and his wife, Bertha is dead, although Edward tried to save her life. Jane decides to marry Edward. (Reader, I married him!). Returning to Thornfield, Jane is a more complete character because she has experienced life, both with and without, Mr Rochester. For Jane, marrying Edward is her dream because she loves him completely including all of his flaws. He loves her and*

*allows her to have the family she so desperately craves. At last she has found a home. I think Jane finds her 'home' with Rochester; because she finds herself.*

Looking back on my own love life, I must say at seventeen years-old, I found the most important thing I looked for in a man was an attraction: did I fancy them? Did they fancy me?

My first serious boyfriend sent me a Valentine card asking me out to the pub. He was five years older than me, was more experienced, could drive, could drink. The lure of an older man attracted me. We went to a pub and sat and chatted about bands. His favourite was Pink Floyd. I hadn't heard of then, but felt too gauche to say this.

He invited me back to his house to meet his mother. This was my first meeting with a boyfriend's parent, and on a first date too! His mother was lovely, but a little drunk and enthusiastic to meet me. I don't think anyone has been so pleased to see me in my whole life, except maybe my own mum! She gushed about how much she liked me and took out the photo album, treating me to lots of pictures of him over the ages, telling me what a wonderful boy he is. She made me a coffee but I hate the stuff with a passion, but first date nerves made me mute and I drank the bitter liquid as fast as I could, so I could make my excuses and leave. We went out on a few more dates but I avoided going back to his house. On hindsight, I was immature and embarrassed about all the fuss and attention his mum was paying me. The relationship dwindled and I ended up dumping him. Why? He was too keen and I wanted light-hearted fun. We were at different times in our life and wanted different things. He was romantic, putting an arm around me, buying me a Valentine's card and gifts, treating me to drinks, and I believed in all the romance and the gestures, but what was I giving him? I couldn't be myself because I didn't know myself properly and in situations I found embarrassing, I just wanted to walk away; I didn't have enough confidence to express my discomfort, and I didn't have my own experiences to fall back on.

My second serious boyfriend was Dave. He was three years older than me. I started University and was enjoying all the drinking and partying. Dave and I used to spend Saturday nights going to Bury or Manchester and getting drunk, visiting different restaurants or bars. Then we would spend Sunday watching Formula 1 or going out on his motorbike. For tea, we would have cannelloni or lasagne with deep fried chips. These weekends were bliss. I was in love. However, I realised later not really in love with Dave, but with the freedom of not being at home, at being able to go out to new places, being able to go out dancing and being young and vibrant. I was in love with finding out about what type of person I wanted to become.

I was studying English, a subject I loved, and finding out about the adult world of Manchester and my place in it, and I let Dave decide what we did at the weekends and followed his interests and not really my own.

When we broke up, I decided to be fearless and applied for a summer job as a camp counsellor working with children in St Lois, America. I arrived, completely out of my comfort zone, and every day for nine weeks led spoilt American kids around the camp from one activity to another. I slept on hard picnic benches under the night stars and one uncomfortable night in a car.

The kids were challenging but fun. I found a new friend called Peaches (we were all given a camp name – mine being Rose). Peaches and I laughed together gossiped, and on our days off (once a week) we went shopping, walking around in cartoon character boxer shorts. I had started to find out who I was. Love included friends, family and children. I later went on to become a primary school teacher.

I married when I was twenty-six and I have two children, Katie (13) and Thomas (11). I have many loves in my life: my children, my family, my cat Roary, my job, and my hobbies. My hobbies are reading, creative writing, swimming and yoga. Over the years, I have dedicated time to my husband and have put his needs before my own, and then I did the same with my children. However, in 2013 I became sick. I realised I needed to spend time with myself to find out what I love and, more importantly, to take better care of myself and show myself love. This journey led me to develop time for my hobbies; before, I felt selfish if I made time to go swimming or I decided to write a short story. Now, I know it is essential for me to make time for myself and I am a better wife, mum, friend, sister and daughter because I have learnt how to love myself.

My husband is flawed and I am flawed. Mr. Perfect or Mrs. Perfect doesn't exist. If I am thoughtful, kind and can share my day and listen to those I love and help them with their celebrations and their struggles, then I am being the best me. This is the person I love and I hope they love me too. I would love there to be a romantic love which consumes you entirely and makes you feel wonderful all of the time. This is life, with its beautiful symmetry of yin and yang; we need the pain of falling out of love to realise the power and beauty of being in love.

The greatest gift is to be loved and to love. All the people in my life bring me something special and I hope I make their life special too. Gratitude for the little moments of every day count for a lot. Like when my husband makes my tea because I've had a hard day. Love is like the ruins of Thornfield; if there is a foundation - ourselves - who we love, then we can start to build a life with someone else, and make their life and our own life happy and

worthwhile.

I am always learning how to love better. We are responsible for ourselves and how we love. We can't make someone love us and we will have heartbreaks because we are humans and we are all flawed. I hope I am like Jane; I know myself, I like myself and I love with all of my heart. No-one knows if there's a happy ending, but I'm sure enjoying the present moment.

**“There can be no passion, and by  
consequence no love, where there  
is not imagination.”**

*William Godwin*

# ROSE

Age: 66

Nationality: Canadian

Place of Residence: Canada

I met my first boyfriend when I was four or five years-old, and he was my first in a series of lessons on love, one of which was harsh and long lasting. I don't remember much about my first beau's friendship though, but my mother seems to think he adored me. Maybe such early adulation formed a mindset beyond which I was unable to see the truth, motivations, or agendas of other admirers.

Less than twenty years later, I moved into a run-down motel with my two pre-school children. I had just left my husband, and father of my children, of over five years. We had met in high-school, had married, precipitately, but from thereon our goals and ambitions veered in different directions; I had embraced wife-and-motherhood, but he had never welcomed fatherhood, and was disillusioned with the work for which he had trained. His job in a nine-to-five, I-will-be-here-for-life public utility company frustrated him. He looked to other lifestyles, and other occupations. This was the early seventies and the changing mores of the times influenced some of our friends to join the drop-out generation. But I, with two children, could never see myself living in a commune, eating spaghetti and wilted carrots, and inflicting lice and malnutrition on my offspring. In response to growing insecurity, I found work, put my kids in daycare, and became a single mother before I was a single mother. Then I left him. I was twenty-three. As I unpacked my kids' toys and hung my dresses, I told myself that I had made the right decision.

Perhaps, if I had been older, and less selfish, I might have proposed some kind of happy medium; an alternative lifestyle that might have been comfortable for both of us, and that provided my children with structure and family life. Instead I moved into the slum. It was supposed to be temporary, until I could rent something better and, as I had a car and a job, I planned on finding a proper home soon. However, I hadn't counted on meeting the man next door, and I hadn't realized how the stress of the few years had hurt my ego and drained my self-confidence. I didn't know that I was vulnerable. The routine of getting up in the morning, packing kids' lunches, and changes of clothes into the car, dropping them at the babysitter, working eight hours, (happily at a job that I liked), then collecting children, feeding and bathing them, reading stories, tucking them in, and then sitting on my couch (where I slept) by myself, drew on all of my reserves; physical, mental, and spiritual. Although I had already spent many evenings alone, it was different, maybe a little scary. I

never acknowledged loneliness or fear, possibly due to exhaustion and in survival mode, I didn't have time to consider my thoughts, feelings, and desires.

When the man next door stopped to speak to me one evening when I was coming in and he was going out, I must have felt pleased that he seemed to find my conversation stimulating. That conversation led to others. I liked the man. Well-groomed and well-mannered, he listened to me, he complimented my dress. Best of all, he spoke to my children, and smiled as they babbled their toddler and pre-schooler stories. He didn't own a car, having not long arrived from another city in order to be closer to his parents. Unlike many men of the '70s, he wore his hair short, and we must have looked like the perfect family when we started going out, children included. When he met my family, they thought him pleasant and likeable. After a relationship in which I felt that my husband dragged my children and me along like boat anchors while he searched for his true calling, here was a man who wanted me beside him and considered my children a bonus. An instant family.

I met his parents, and they too were thrilled to have instant grandchildren. I had no idea of the angsts, histories, demons, and drives that lurked beneath the surface, of both his life and that of his parents. My new man confessed early on that he had in the past had issues, but he assured me that that was all behind him now. I had had zero experience with addiction and depression. I naively believed that addictions could be overcome with willpower, so I did not question his admission, or probe more deeply into his past. We became closer and then moved in together. Within the year we moved entirely to another city, away from both of our families, in pursuit of what he said were better opportunities for him.

Although I had a secure job, I gave it up in order to allow him to explore the prospects supposedly more available in the bigger town. We leased a house and I found work right away, but my salary barely covered rent and groceries. My eldest child went to school, and made friends, and both children had structure in their lives in a decent neighbourhood. They were fond of their step-father, and he treated them as if they were his own.

However, the opportunity he sought did not appear and this, compounded with an unforeseen physical health problem that rendered him unable to work for months, initiated a downward spiral. He recovered his physical health, but never found full-time work. When he began to binge on drugs and alcohol, I grasped that his avowal of being recovered from his past addictions had been overstated.

His indulgences lead to increased bouts of depression, leading to more indulgences, and more depression. Was it anger, despair, revenge, or our imposed poverty that drove him to resurrect old

addictive habits? The time between binges grew shorter and more unpredictable, as did his temper. I believed that the kids never heard the bumps in the night when I bit my lip and dodged slaps and punches.

Although he never harmed the children, I placed them in day-and-after-school care. I urged him to talk to our family doctor, or his parents. Our doctor recommended counselling, which he refused, and his parents refused to acknowledge the problem.

I hear stories of women who suffer domestic violence. I hear people commenting on these situations with something like: 'She should just leave,' as if it's all so simple. What keeps these women tied to abusive partners? Guilt because they believe they are to blame, low self-esteem because they believe they are failures, economic dependence because they have no skills, or isolation because they have no family or close friends? The situations may go deeper and broader than anybody watching from the outside can ever know. I had a good job and supportive managers. I had workplace friends, who I know would have helped me had I asked. I had a family I could have called upon at any time. In fact, my family, more perceptive than I gave them credit for, had already said that I should get out, or kick the bum to the curb. This without fully knowing the extent of the abuse. Yet, I stayed. Ironically, I knew that he wanted a family and a household to call his own. His childhood had been frightful and although his parents had finally called a truce, there was no truce in his own war with addiction and depression.

It wasn't until I was in danger of my house burning down around our ears, that I knew it was time. He would stay up until all hours, roaming the house before falling asleep on the couch, often with a cigarette burning. After the second flaming couch, which was somehow my fault, I again hid bruises at work, and then I left.

How did I get myself into this mess? How did I not see this coming? We were together for five years. I may have started out being in love, but that evaporated in under two years when I realized that the fairy-tale family image he had dangled in front of me was just that. Yet I stayed for years longer than I should have.

Over the last forty years, I have often wondered why I did so. Years of introspection and re-examination of events leave me no wiser. Did I believe the illusion that had a series of ifs been fulfilled (if he had found meaningful work, if he had accepted medical help, if I had been better equipped to help him), things would have gotten better? Or would I have become the scapegoat and punching bag for whatever frustrations he encountered regardless of our circumstances? I don't know.

I do know that the tragedy of his life and loss still occupies a small black space in my heart. He committed suicide within the year after our split.

**“To love is to receive a glimpse of  
heaven.”**

*Karen Sunde*

# ABIGAIL

Age: 37

Nationality: South African

Country of residence: South Africa

I was always looking for love. Here, see, my gorgeous wrists that I tried to slit once upon a time, maybe because of him, or because of what he did not say, or because he was not in love with me. I built bridges with my hands and realised that perhaps not every voyage in my life was a catastrophe. Childhood was hell. Adolescence more so as I grew more and more competitive, more and more confident, and accomplished. After winter's gorgeous ice, its crucial moisture a sweetheart of nothings seeped into me and my suffering (that has always seemed perpetual in my inner child's life). I discovered Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* and Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*. There's a slippery emptiness in both yet, yet also something crooked, fluid night work. You see it was then that I saw my real enemy's face. Perhaps it had the likeness of my mother's, my sister's, or all women for that matter. Plucked, moving forward, the interpretation of untranslated language, and there, other women finding love, discovering that reading can be a secretive pastime, happenings remembered, happenings forgotten, sounds spied upon, people becoming monsters or birds, larks, Ted Hughes's wrens. Owls touching a living world filled with sleep, wind, syllables, vowels, consonants, gestures. I think of love as this. The imaginative before it is lost. The sea is within me. Andre Brink's Ingrid (Jonker's) sea is within me, her tan and her white bikini. Wherever her soul goes, and her spirit follows, I go, I move, I went there in my twenties, I still make preparations for images like a camera. Andre's Ingrid will always be an iron rose. I will always be lost in the translation of an age of iron.

I think that men and women when they make love that there is a divine intimacy to be found there. And then everything becomes dark (for me). I ask myself where is this river leading me to. Where is this memory, mostly of Johannesburg, leading me to? There was Tara and then there was the man. Perhaps even the image of silence in the room of that night. It will become a shroud, shrivelled, broken although its existence will still remain eternal, otherworldly to me just like the man in my life that night. The idea of silence will always remain in my young, inexperienced mind. I am woman now. A woman who is not so young and inexperienced when it comes to men anymore. That night, I felt enclosed like a parcel tied with string. And throughout the night, that particular night, I found myself come to untie and tie the string again and again and again. I thought to

myself that there was some reality to 'this string,' that it would give me courage if I felt the deep pain of being 'easy' and that I would never be loved again. That night, I felt that I could never again be mysterious to this man who was lying next to me. I felt brightness go out of me. There is nothing savage about love but there can be about lovemaking. This is the domain of roses, of Jean Rhys's wild *Sargasso Sea*, splendid books, the virgin who knows that there is no turning back now (she knows she must suffer bravely now, put on her bravest face, and that this night-time tension will soon pass as she must turn from girl into woman).

And in the end, there was no mother to embrace me, to read stories to me, to offer me advice about my poetry or love or gentlemen. There were no companions, only sleeping tablets in a glass of water for my insomnia. There were only English teachers, film school lecturers, and Holden Caulfield's Salinger for me to fall in love with but not really get close enough to. For me, in my time, most adult men are alcoholics or addicts of some kind, and their women and offspring follow in their footsteps. Most of their thoughts are unholy. They want and want from a material world who gives only to those who work hard and are committed. They write love poems to each other (flesh, a prize) as if they understand what the meaning of that word is. In my neighbourhood, men are always resolved to drifting while women nurture. It is just what I have experienced. It might of course be different for other women. I have to live with the choices that I have made. And if those men and women's children are disasters in the end, they do not blame themselves. Somebody must be to blame, but not them. The adults that I have met and come across think that they are pure. It's impossible for them to do wrong in the eyes of their own children or the law or society. They blame society, the taking of barbiturates, their children's friends, and teachers and that is why I will never understand humanity, I will never get to grips with the insensitivity, the brutality of man against man, crime and murder and rape.

(My first swim at Tara Hospital before the first time)

I felt I could finally identify with Bernice Rubens, Ann Quin, and Anna Kavan, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Bessie Head and Ingrid Jonker. I too had become the elected candidate now giving way to medicine. Lithium therapy. Cognitive therapy. Monoamine oxidase inhibitors. Were there really anti-depressants for intelligent people who were too imaginative, too intelligent for their own good. I lost my voice like so many of the 'creatures' at the hospital. What is this vagueness? It's all coming back to me now and I don't want it to. It's going on a rampage inside my head. This room in this ward in this hospital is loathsome. I am loathsome. Every day a wave of

psychology. It is like hitting my head against a brick wall, a chemistry textbook, the Periodic Table. I did not feel emancipated or sexually liberated in any way. I felt that there was a seismic-scarcity of something. There were threads that were not communicating in any way, or threads behaving as a catalyst.

(I never had a man bring me flowers and a good bottle of red wine in my twenties)

All I felt was a vicious and menacing mentality towards everyone around me but in the swimming pool I found grace and mercy there at Tara. The nurses, the doctors, the patients, and the flowers in the gardens. Traumatic experiences that children have to undergo, shock, terror, intricate victimisation. In Port Elizabeth, were gangs still going on a rampage with sticks and knives, guns in the air. Shots ringing out like church bells ringing. Half-in-pain, half-vacant I will lie there (half the girl) until the early hours of the morning tying and untying this string. The man who lies beside me. Well, his flesh is sated. Will probably give me some money in the morning, put me into a taxi, give me enough so I can buy myself a coffee or some breakfast in a restaurant. I will still be plunged into a pit of ice. Frozen, naked I tell myself I feel nothing too. Nothing except the humiliation of a 'loose girl.' I will blame him. He will blame my youth if I decide to make a scene, or my inexperience. There had been a flicker of acknowledgement between both of us when we had first met.

(He bought me my first cappuccino)

And I hurried, and he hurried to our secret rendezvous. A hotel in Hillbrow. We both rushed. The room was clean. The sheets were white. Spread out like wide moonlight. I was nervous, hands writhing, in a panic. Was left wondering what to do when I discovered that I had nothing to do really. I was not the one who was in control of the situation. Hurrying and peaceful, was what I thought of him before. Now I just felt suffocated, alone, lost, a stranger. And then I remembered my appendix scar and my birthmarks (I wanted to shield his gaze from that), and I no longer felt shimmering or glamorous. He looked different. He looked much older (a son was in the picture). And suddenly I was very frightened, but knew that he was holding out his hand to me and there was no turning back now. So, I decided that I would feign indifference. I could not speak. He didn't say anything either. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He offered me a cigarette but I shook my head, said I didn't smoke. And now in the moonlight I was the victim. This was not love. I could see now it would just be another traumatic experience that I would never find closure to. I could see my domineering mother's eyes in his eyes.

(The hunger)

I could see the hunger there. Hunger in a man's eyes! It didn't feel strange at all. My face went all blank. It was as if my body was made out of glass. Precious glass or precious stone. Tiger's eye. It had to be if I had to live through this. I detached myself from the lovemaking (which made me feel damaged, haunted, I felt banished from my body, guilty). There was no bond between us like there had never been a bond between me and my mother. The world is a sad place filled with wrong people who think they are right all the time. There are also people, interesting and peaceful people who do not know or understand how to communicate, that perhaps they are not right all the time. Human beings are hunters. We are gatherers. We are nurturers. Stunned at our own vitality, and then the transition from youth to becoming elderly. What is magic really? Childbirth, a birth pang, and hallucinatory illusion, languishing with a book? Can you smell that? Its territory, borders without words to mark them. And when the suicidal illness and all the 'madness-experts' my parents paid left me, so did the man with the small child in the picture (my first everything). It left permanently, and I did not find it strange in my thirties that men did not look at me anymore with desire. In my twenties everything had just happened by accident. It had just been an accidental offering, and an-experimental-passage-of-sorts. I still find myself thinking of him. I don't think thoughts of me though ever cross his mind, but for me my soul is still on fire when I think of him or his sensitive hands.

**“True love doesn't come to you, it  
has to be inside you.”**

*Julia Roberts*

# AARATI

Age:26

Nationality: Indian

Place of Residence: Bahrain

As a young girl, I was always fascinated by the concept of romantic love. Especially since my upbringing was that of a strict and traditional one. I was sheltered and not allowed to question or explore, in any manner, the idea of romanticism and how that can change one's life or thoughts. Even growing up, during my teenage years, the concept of love was that of a very skewed one, and was mostly backed by the raw and half-cooked ideas of my fellow peers or of that by mushy pot-boilers on TV. Now that I am an adult, going through quarter-life crisis and facing the mountain of having an arranged marriage - as is deemed appropriate by our culture - I sometimes think why aren't we given an unbiased view about love? And why is love, as a concept, made to be so complicated?

## **Platonic Love**

Platonic love can and may have many connotations to it, but for me, it remains that kind of love between two people that has all the workings and elements of a romantic love, but without any carnal desires. I have been in one too many platonic relationships. Over time, either I or my partner have developed feelings for each other. In some cases the feelings were conveyed, and in some it remained bottled up due to the fear of losing the other. But by far I have felt the most pain and heartache when I lost someone with whom I shared a platonic relationship.

## **Unrequited Love**

Every person is said to have gone through this kind of love at least once in their lifetime. If not, then guess you are lucky! The worst scenario is when you fall in love with someone who is your best friend. Your feelings towards that person - and sometimes actions too - can get selfish. Feelings tend to overpower your common sense and in the process create havoc in a relationship, and also your mental peace. Have I been in an unrequited love situation? Yes indeed. But thanks to my introverted nature, the feelings never materialized into something negative. I was more of the type to back off from the person and the sticky situation, and then wallow myself in grief.

## **Infatuations/Attractions**

When you are attracted or infatuated with someone, you tend to confuse the mixed feelings to that of love. They have the similar intensity to that of love, but is nowhere close to the real feeling. The best part to realizing that you are actually not in love is when the initial giddiness of attraction wears off and you are presented with the real person in front of you. When in an infatuated state of mind, we have the tendency to portray our flashy and uber-cool selves as a projection to the beloved. And then, over time, as deep and emotional sides of a person start to surface, one realizes that the liking was only based on some external qualities, and not for the real person. I have been forever attracted to many beautiful faces and personalities only to realize over time that how fickle my heart could be, that it gets enamoured by the silliest of things.

## **Committed Love**

Like I mentioned in above, due to the mushy portrayal of love on TV and other pop culture, the idea of romantic love was very skewed or rather, it was a very candyfloss one. All I imagined were colors and confetti and happiness and kisses in a romantic relationship. And spurred on by these imaginations, I was in a relationship with a person which I later realized was just an infatuation. Unfortunately, the person in question had other motives and very conveniently 'ghosted' on me. Now, if you don't know what ghosting is, ghosting means when a potential love interest, after dating, decides things are not working or is not interested in you but does not have the courage to tell you. So, the person goes missing completely. No messages, no prior intimation, nothing. The person is just gone. The humiliation and rejection I faced in this relationship made me question myself, and somehow it played on my psyche in my future potential relationships too. I had turned into a non-committal person and viewed love as something that happened to only a lucky few. I became afraid of betrayal. And one fine day, a person came into life who very smoothly waltzed his way into my heart and mind. The relationship seemed just right and exactly what I was chasing after since the time I had been able to wrap my head around romantic love. The love was strong enough to have survived three years and then it died its death. But it will always remain a sweet memory in my mind.

## **Rebound Love**

Rebound love occurs due to the void created from the heartbreak of a serious relationship. One wants to fill in the void and hence gets into

a rebound relationship. The rebound can happen immediately or can happen after a period of time. I know of instances where the rebound relationship has actually turned into something meaningful as well as rebound relationships that have just faded into oblivion because that is how the nature of the relationship is. The fact that people get into rebound relationships just makes me think about the thought process about people; we feel so lost, so vulnerable without the aspect of a romantic love to lean on, that we are ready to even get into a relationship that is probably born out of revenge or of low self-esteem. Instances like these make me believe in the power of a romantic relationship and how important it is to have a healthy relationship, otherwise it just messes up with the concept of something that is actually so beautiful. For me, as a person, I am someone who somehow gets invested in a person and hence if a relationship doesn't work out, I prefer removing myself out of the equation altogether, rather than maintaining a 'friends only' status. And so I have zero contacts with anyone with whom I had - once upon a time - shared something even potentially close to love. My rebound relationship faced the same fate, as it was not something meant to be, but it was something that I was forcing it to be.

## **Marriage**

I kept this for the last as this is the only relationship I am yet to explore. Marriage, in our culture, is something that is pre-decided by our parents, as it is believed that marriage is not only two people coming together, but two families as well. Since I am a millennial born in the early '90s, I have mixed old school ideologies and that of new age modernism. A part of me wants to heed to the traditional values of my elders, because that set-up ensures security, while the other part wants to go all out and live recklessly, with my heart on my sleeve. My parents advised me about what elements constitute the foundation of a successful marriage. For me it seems all alien because I have different expectations from a marriage (thanks to over-exposure from the Internet and millennialism). I am at a stage in life where I have only marriage left to complete my existence in my traditional society, and so my parents have begun the ordeal. But to me, this is all something bizarre. I am almost convinced of the idea, but at the same time I want to question the time-bound nature of marriage. I am not averse to traditional marriage, but I am also not comfortable with the tight rules associated with marriage. Maybe this confusion is because I do not know what to expect from a marriage.

## **Conclusion**

So, in all, I believe as an emotional human I have been able to touch upon most variations of love and what it has to offer. Some have been bitter and some bitter-sweet. But these experiences helped me shape the concept of love in my mind as if it was merely soft clay. These experiences helped me give some shape to it, and helped me learn a lot about myself, about the people involved, and about love in general. My expectations out of love was always the same: I seek a loving and understanding relationship and acceptance of who I am. But due to the varied nature of love, these aspects get relegated to the background and other factors come into play. Having had unsuccessful attempts in the past, I believe my only saving grace is a successful marriage. Maybe few years down the line I would be writing another excerpt about how my marriage turned out and what were my expectations out of it and what I eventually got.

**“The meaning of life... I think the  
meaning of life is, I think it's love.”**

*Julie Benz*

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