



Pros light the fire

Refugees from dating websites find old-fashioned matchmakers are a modern solution

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He was charming and witty, tall, handsome — and looking for love.

He was in his mid-30s, running a successful software company. A self-confessed workaholic, he still found time for skiing, adventure trips and fine dining. But nowhere had he happened upon the right woman — not on the bar scene, not going out with mindless friends of friends. His pals joked that he'd dated half of Toronto.

He even signed up with a matchmaker, describing his ideal woman as well-educated, hard working, self-confident and feminine. He went on several set-ups. "They were all great women, but no sparks," he says. His love quest went on hold for several years when his business heated up. Then one day, while driving on the Gardiner, the car phone rang. The voice on the other end said: "I found her."

It was his matchmaker, Ruth Claramunt, whom he'd completely forgotten about. He declined the prospective match, too busy, he said. You must, insisted Claramunt. He finally relented, calling the woman for a date.

Through the glass panes of her front door, he remembers seeing her, a beautiful blonde with a warm, welcoming smile, as she came to answer his knock. The rest is a blur. He went kind of numb, dazed. This man-about-town shook her hand with the wrong hand. He muttered

something nonsensical. He walked past her and sat down, thunderstruck.

"The only way I can explain it," he says, "is love at first sight."

Cupid's arrow struck deep. Bullseye for the matchmaker. "Dating seemed like a numbers game," explains the smitten man. "I'd hoped a matchmaker would cut the odds in my favour."

Singles searching for soulmates want shortcuts. Fed up with bars and mass meet-and-greet events, frazzled by speed-dating and either spooked by Internet romance or burned by online liars, they're turning for help to a more traditional trade: matchmakers.

"Everyone looking for love would like some help," explains Toronto matchmaker Susan Kates. "They get stuck. They get tired. They want someone to do the work for them. That's our society, you hire a gardener, you hire a trainer. It's about personal service."

These aren't your great-grandmothers' matchmakers. Forget Yenta in *Fiddler on the Roof* and think Alicia Silverstone, the divorce lawyer cum matchmaker on the failed TV show *Miss Match*. Many modern matchmakers have business backgrounds — marketing, sales, executive head-hunting — and some are human resources, social work types. Although they each work differently, they generally charge \$1,000 or \$1,500

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Matchmakers From L1

membership. Some target niche markets, such as religious or ethnic groups. Equal Chemistry, started last in Toronto, is geared to successful, delicately fit singles.

Some even study the ancient art of the match. Opened in 2003, the Matching Institute in New York City offers a 22-hour, certified course that's directed Cupid wannabes from across North America and overseas.

It's not only so much is book learning, it's about gut feeling. "It's about listening, observing. It's instinctual," says Kates, a graduate of the New York school. "There are no guarantees. I can connect people, but I can't create chemistry. That's up to them."

Known in the dating bunker — Kates' cement office in her North Toronto home — the petite 48-year-old is on the phone, giggling. "Oh! Wasn't I right?" she says to an obviously happy client. "Let me know how it goes."

It's a woman reporting a great first date. The delighted guy had already told Kates a second date was planned. At first glance, they were an unlikely pair. Although both in their 50s, he's a teddy bear of a guy. She was a delicate-featured 90s-era woman. "They're both very genuine, giving, warm people. I knew it would be a good fit. Will they ever marry?" asks Kates with a shrug. "That's not my objective. I get a phone call saying, 'She's lovely. We're going out again.' That's the nicest thing."

She keeps her matchmaking clientele small. They're all men, seriously looking for the right women. Many have come through Kates' main business, Dinnerworks, a singles introductory service where groups of men and women go out to restaurants together. For a matchmake client, she approaches women from the Dinnerworks database or from her network of people.

"It's a leap of faith," says a 44-year-old landscape architect, looking to settle down and have a family. On his questionnaire, he said he wanted a woman with the same goals, someone generous of spirit, not self-absorbed or cynical. Kates introduced him to two women, one of whom he's now dating exclusively. "It's blossomed quickly," he says happily. "Our paths would never have crossed otherwise."

For many, a matchmaker is a safe refuge after disastrous experiences on the singles scene. "The last guy I met on my own turned out to be 45 and still living in his parents' basement," says one 47-year-old divorced woman.

Through a large dating service, she encountered only weirdos. After a first lunch, one guy announced, "Okay, let's go to bed." Another man muttered in peculiar voices and told her he was having strange thoughts about her. She fled.

By contrast, she's enjoyed meeting the five guys matchmaker Claramunt has introduced her to. "She weeds out the crazies."

Claramunt, owner of Hearts Introduction Service, has been in the love business in Toronto for 20 years. The former credit manager — "It's the same skill, assessing people," she insists — found her calling after matching her secretary with a colleague of her husband. "It was like an epiphany," explains Claramunt, 57.

In recent years, she says, more never-married twenty- and thirtysomethings — too busy and too transient to meet on their own — have discovered matchmaking. There's also more of a high-end market now. She's begun a deluxe executive service, starting at \$10,000, that's precisely honed for clients with no time for hit-and-miss dates.

Claramunt and other matchmakers sell themselves on the personal touch. She interviews all her clients in their homes, she says, and turns down 7 to 10 per cent of them. They're not up to standards, such as the reject who cursed and snapped his fingers for his maid.

At Equal Chemistry, matchmaker Tory Howat is downright picky; only those aged 30 to 50, successful in a career and physically fit — either competitive athletes or at least highly active. No couch potatoes need apply.

"It's why I meet everybody," says Howat, 38, a runner in training for next year's Iron Man. "Someone who jogs once a week won't do. It's not the same personality type. I'm just listening to

what my database wants."

But even among chosen clientele, sticky situations occur. After a date, a matchmaker gets feedback from both sides. One may be enamoured, the other dismissive — a diplomatic standoff. "I'll just say, 'Let's move on,'" Howat says.

Sometimes, patterns emerge. One young woman kept interrogating her dates. "I felt I was in the precinct with a

light over my head," wrote one guy. Claramunt told the woman to relax and have fun.

"Nice guy, horrible haircut," was the consistent word on one of Howat's clients. She took him to her stylist and his love life perked up.

Other problems run deeper, turning the matchmaker into quasi-therapist. "My husband jokes I'm borderline Equal Chemistry and Dear Tory," says

Howat, who's done her share of hand-holding over late-night phone calls.

"I'm working on a tough one now," Kates says. "Basically, he wants his old girlfriend back. I can't just say, 'Honey, she's gone.' I keep encouraging him to broaden what he's looking for."

When one female client complained that the man acted too forwardly, Kates tactfully went over dating etiquette with him.

At Soulmates Inc, a Jewish matchmaking service, founder Eve Potok says she doesn't change people, just accommodates them. For instance, she wouldn't suggest a make-over for an untidy woman. "Probably some schlep-py guy would do just fine."

For those clients waiting for their next arranged date, there's heightened hope that this could be it. "I'm cautiously optimistic," says a 35-year-old lawyer who liked his five matches but is still looking. "You become jaded by my age, but then the romantic side kicks in. You think, 'Could this be my last first kiss?'"

You never know. There are those fairy tale endings.

Remember Bachelor Number 1? His love match with the blonde was mutual. "When I saw him, I had this feeling, he looks like he could be my husband. It freaked me out," says the woman, whose mother enrolled her with the matchmaker as a Christmas present. They married 7½ months after the first meeting and have two young children.

How did Claramunt know? It was more than their similar backgrounds, values and goals, she insists. "It was a feeling I had from both of them," says the matchmaker enigmatically. "It's an intangible." Case closed.



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