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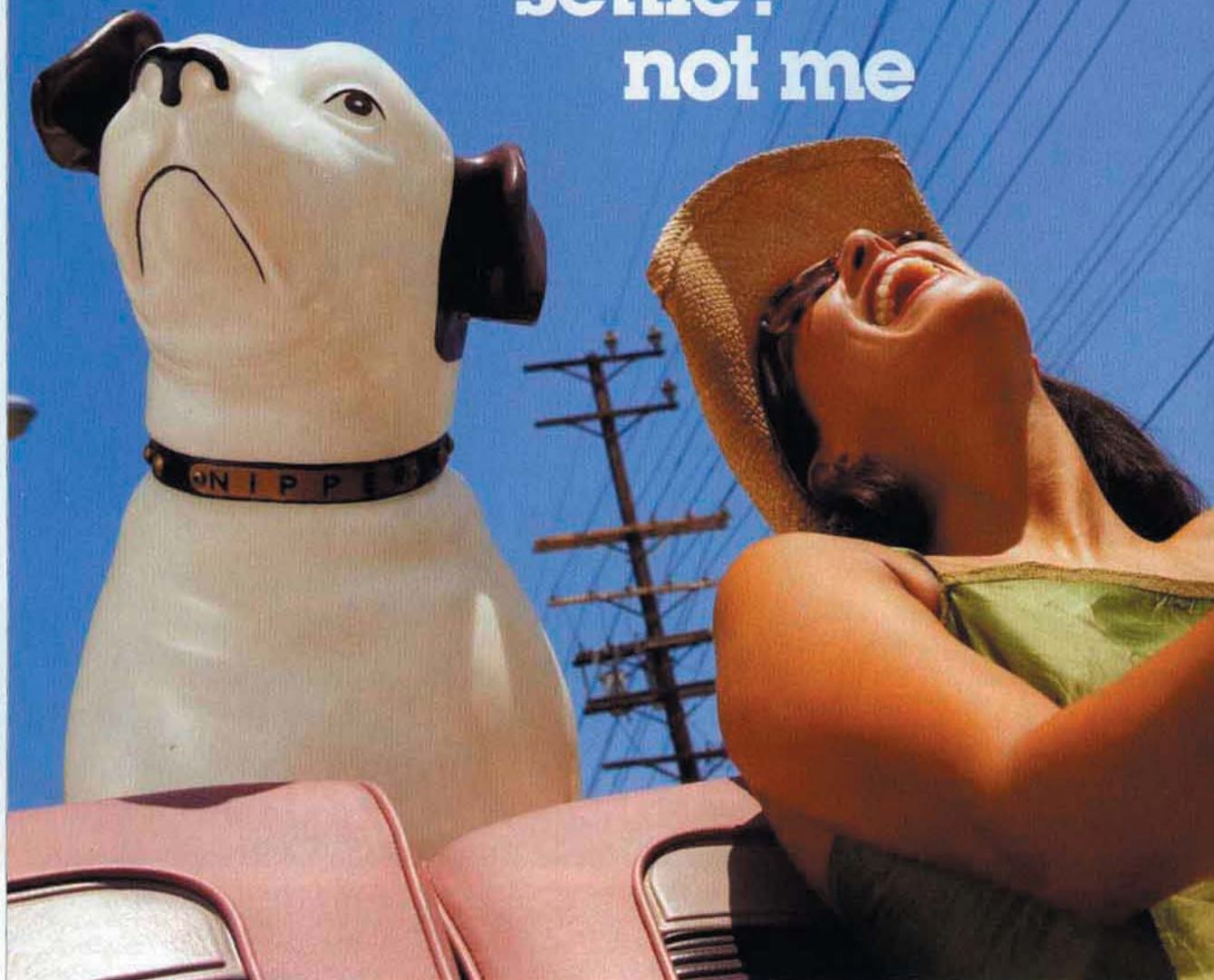


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Bark up
a different tree.

settle? not me



Does finding “the one” mean sacrificing the spark of attraction? Naah! Even when you click in every other way and wedding invites are clogging your mailbox, it still pays to stay your own course

By Sasha Cagen

It was a Sunday afternoon in November, and I was about to meet bachelor number four in my new campaign to be open-minded about the possibilities of online dating. As I biked to meet Tom at a teahouse, I promised myself I would not expect immediate lust. Maybe it was just a nod toward reality; when you meet someone randomly, on the basis of a picture, a profile, and a few coy e-mails, the chances of mutual attraction are not great. Not surprisingly, the sight of Tom—in gray wool slacks and navy sweater, and at 5’7” (an inch shorter than me)—did not turn me on. He just wasn’t my type. But over the next 4 hours of tea and conversation, something strange transpired.

Previous online dates had felt like job interviews, with Q & A sessions about siblings and the inevitable “How long have you lived in San Francisco?” With Tom I’d hit the online dating jackpot: Conversation was natural and free-flowing. When we parted there was no kiss, but we both clearly stated we’d like to see each other again.

Our second date, 4 days later: *The Motorcycle Diaries*. It was my suggestion and a mistake I realized as soon as the first scenes began. Note to self: Never go to a movie starring Gael García Bernal with someone you are not overwhelmingly attracted to. It’s just not fair to anyone involved. Tom is Yale-educated, but he had no pretensions: He confessed that he hadn’t realized that *The Motorcycle Diaries* was about



I wish I could tell you that a light switched on in my body that made me drag Tom upstairs to discover a surprise lothario.

nice than commanding)—gentle kissing was all I could muster in the way of sexual interaction. Inviting him inside my house seemed almost unthinkable.

The answer to my dilemma should have been easy: Don't continue to see men you're not attracted to. But when everything else is there—the emotional connection, the pitch-perfect banter, that great ease between two people—and wedding invitations continue to appear in the mailbox, it gets harder to slam the door on the mythical gradual attraction.

How long do you wait to figure out whether there's an X-factor? Around this time, a coworker told me the story of meeting her husband on Match.com. She could take him or leave him on the first date, but by date five they were groping each other's legs during dinner. I decided five would be my magic number—enough time to let love bloom but not so long that I would lead Tom on or get stuck in a lustless relationship of fake kissing.

For the most part, we had fun. On date number four, we were on our way to see another movie, *Vera Drake*, and I wondered aloud whether it was immoral to smuggle a bottle of Diet Coke under my jacket into a struggling neighborhood movie house. Tom laughed and said that I must feel guilty about a lot of things. Once again Tom got me. I got him. He thought my neurotic flaws were cute. Still, when he was about to drop me off, a lump rose in my throat, a physical feeling I've experienced since high school when I'm on a date with a guy who I don't want to kiss. My body revolts and tells me: *Sasha, get out of the car.*

For me, being single is not hard. I like my freedom. But occasions like these—clicking with a guy in every way minus the “spark”—brings on a wash of painful self-interrogation, making me wonder if all these years of being single are because there's something wrong with me. Am I afraid of being with a guy who likes me and is actually available? Is this a subconscious, self-destructive belief that I don't really deserve the nice guy? Welcome to the tortured mind of a “picky” single woman.

I wish I could tell you that a light switched on in my body that made me drag Tom upstairs to discover a surprise

lothario or that I gave up on sexual attraction and realized I'm happier with friend-as-partner-as-bosom-buddy.

Why does the body matter? Because it does. There's a second brain in our bodies, located in our gut. Intuitively I knew this during my twenties—I never would have carried on with 5 weeks of self-flagellation, trying to be attracted to someone I didn't want to kiss. But recently I'm more willing to entertain thoughts of compromise. I've turned my love life into a social science experiment. I liked Tom to the ends of the earth, but all my joy at meeting a kindred spirit had drained away under the pressure of trying to turn him into a boyfriend.

No Buts About It

Our last date (number five) was a Friday night. After eating we wandered through the streets of our neighborhood. Tom wanted to get a drink, but I asked if we could sit down on a nearby bench. I began my prepared speech.

“Tom, I want you to know how much I like you; I think you are phenomenal.”

“Get to the but,” he said.

“But...I don't feel that our relationship is going in a romantic direction.”

“It's going to take a couple of hours for my ego to recover,” he replied. “But I know that what you're doing isn't easy.”

In this moment of emotional honesty, his eyes seemed so brown and open. He seemed like such a strong, real person. Maybe we were just thwarted by meeting online, through the artificial nature of dinners and cups of coffee. But stop, stop—no more endless ambivalence.

We hugged, and as I watched Tom's figure recede down the street, I felt disappointed. If experience proves correct, it's very rare for a nascent friendship to recover from a dating misfire. But I would be lying if I said that I didn't feel a certain buzz of elation. Walking up the stairs to my apartment—alone on a Friday night at 10 P.M.—I felt liberation, a spring in my step, an oh-my-god feeling. I wasn't in love, but at least I had been honest with Tom—and true to myself. **WH**

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Che Guevara until the very end. He had thought the film was just an artsy movie about two guys on a road trip across South America. That he could admit this was hilariously endearing to me. After the movie we had a couple of drinks. As we bundled up in our coats, my anxiety level started to rise. On the second date, a good-night kiss might be in order. Uh-oh.

He's Perfect, Except...

Tom was smart, funny, thoughtful, and he did all the right things with confidence. He called me without playing games. I felt a singular calm around him, a bubble in which other worries did not intrude. But for whatever reason—some unknowable lack of pheromones between us, or his very demeanor (more