

The Possibility of Romance

Okay. I'll admit it. Part of the reason I moved to London was in the hopes of rediscovering a dating life. The reason for my recent lack of romance? I blame two years in Vietnam. It seems the western men are either married, too young, looking for a young Vietnamese consort, or all three. The Vietnamese men are intimidated by the western women. Thus Vietnam is full of frustrated 30 something white women. I was one of them.

When I realised my respect for western men had hit rock bottom, my ego also took a nosedive. What if that part of my life was over? What if I was supposed to compromise more to make my past relationships work and now my love life had expired? What if I had crawled out of the last chance saloon with nothing to show for it?

As a temporary balm for my battered sense of self I turned to online dating. I knew the chances of meeting any of these magical far away emailers was slim, but it gave me a small spark of hope. Hope that someone, somewhere might possibly still consider me attractive or interesting, or preferably both.

Online dating is a little like window shopping. You look at the picture, then move on to the stated benefits in the form of the self written profile. If the combination of these two factors generates a spark of interest, you send or accept a request. Formalities over, you can now start the trial via online chat. Under normal circumstances this would lead to a phone call and if it's all smooth sailing, on to a date. When you're in a different country, this leads instead to longing tinged with an edge of frustration.

My own initial screening measures are reasonably stringent. I rarely talk to anyone without a photo. I have a minimum looks level on the basis that ultimately there has to be a physical spark. I am not a stunner myself, so the bar for this is not set exceptionally high. Passable looks are perfectly acceptable. In a profile, I'm looking for something just a little bit interesting. Everybody thinks they have a good sense of humour and are down to earth. So do I...but there has to be more. I am

a stickler for grammar and I don't do gangster rap or text speak. I appreciate capital letters in the right place and punctuation.

There are also a number of no go's on my list. Immediate exclusions are people who describe themselves as simple, god-fearing, humble, traditional or quiet, because I am none of those. Anyone who says they don't know what to write also loses me. If you don't know what to write about the topic that you know the most about, then how are you going to manage a decent conversation?

Despite my strict rules for communication, I ended up with a reasonable list of potentials that was somewhat soothing for my ego. Some came and went as they found partners or couldn't maintain chat. Others were constant. I had my favourites, but they were few and far between.

So, on a cold winter's day I landed in London and found my way to the dank accommodation I had booked, which felt like it might actually have been in a different city. It's hard to believe that it was in fact only zone 3. I am a disaster case when it comes to accommodation, taking an extremely long time to make a decision and always booking the dodgiest possible option. As a result, I have slept in love hotels in Japan, on the open roof of a hotel in Egypt, and on the floor of a ferry terminal in Thailand. My lumpy sofa bed in Plaistow was also not a well-considered choice.

The excitement of being in London was only mildly overshadowed by my limited number of friends in the city...and then I remembered my online contacts. I had forgotten that they were not only real people, but also many were now in reach. I logged in and there he was, my current favourite. "Guess what?" I typed. "I am in London." He suggested we meet on Monday. Gulp. A real live date, only two days away. The nervous anticipation threatened to overwhelm me as I agreed.

The next two days flew by in a flurry of sight seeing and then it was time for my first proper date in

years. I dress casually, mainly because it is all I have. Due to stopovers in warmer climes, I have a suitcase three quarters full of inappropriate summer clothing. I am compulsively early, so I compensate by turning up even earlier and treating myself to a drawn out coffee session. At the appointed hour I wander to Embankment Station and there he is with a welcoming smile.

I size him up quickly. Nice eyes, a cheeky grin and quite tall, although not as broad as I anticipated. I am sure he is doing the same as I straighten my shoulders and suck my stomach in...and we are off.

As we stroll, I play tourist, giving him the power over where we go and what we do. I talk a little too much to cover my nerves, but the conversation flows. We wander along Southbank admiring the lights of the city and I lament the camera I left on my bed. I wish I could capture the moment. Not just the city lights, but the touch of the cold air on my flushed cheeks and the slightly giddy anticipation that goes with a first date. We wander through the Christmas market, full of tack and warming nosh, stopping for a paper cup full of mulled wine. The fumes cloud my head as I sip on the warm spiced beverage, the cup restoring sensation to my chilled fingertips.

This whole scene is more romantic than I expected. I want to take his hand in mine to express the simple joy of being alive and in good company, but I'm not sure if we're at that stage yet and I don't want to scare him off. This may not be about him. It could just be the excitement of possibilities, the chance of making a connection with someone, no matter how transient, the feeling that suddenly, if only for now, I am not alone.

We are lured into a cosy pub and chat over pints of beer. We cover relationships, previous dates, life views and the like. I have not found anything about him not to like. I also get the feeling that he likes me, at least enough for the date to continue. He makes me feel attractive and interesting for the first time in a long time and it feels good.

Slightly tipsy we move on to dinner, which continues in the same vein. It is easy and comfortable, but with the added butterflies that signal attraction.

As we walk over the Millenium Bridge I step into his space. We both recognise it and pause, but don't react. It is this moment that will become my memory of the evening. The moment that we could have kissed, but didn't.

I am filled with a sense of simple happiness. It is the happiness of possibility. No matter what happens after this date, I know now that there can be moments like these, romantic and loaded with potential. These are the moments I moved to London for. The moments I thought I had lost. The moments that have been given back to me. Even though I now know how this story ends, and it doesn't end well, for those moments I am grateful.

