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SHORT SMOKE AND LIES

I have one particular friend who's always on at me about getting a boyfriend. I was trapped in a car with her once when she turned to me and said, "Nicole, in all honesty, you're a little bit weird. If you don't find yourself a man soon then no one will have you."

This is the same friend who, when I stay with her in Melbourne, refuses to close the bathroom door when she's on the toilet. One day I made a complaint to the effect of, "What the hell is wrong with you? *Close the fucking door,*" to which she replied, "Fuck you, I'm 30 now. I shit with the door open!"

Her partner just shook his head.

So it may have been foolish of me to take her advice and create an account on Plenty of Fish (or POF.com as it calls itself). She insisted that several of her friends had had luck on the Melbourne arm of the site, and then hinted that I might be a pussy.

The account took about an hour to set up. The site asked a whole bunch of pop-psychology questions which gave me hope that my matches would be "true" (or some word like that). I put up a couple of photos of myself that I think are reasonably accurate and don't show too much boob. I wrote in my profile description that I like the arts and culture and am looking for someone with a half decent education. I like a man who can spell. I like a man who has hobbies outside of motorsports and protein shakes.

I hit "done" and waited. My inbox started filling up after literally five minutes. My matches! Exciting.

Tradie_Gr8 likes camping and blonde chicks.

Honest Guy is an honest guy and if you can't handle that then you should probably fuck off. Honest Guy also likes camping.

Tie_Me_Up_81 likes nipple clamps and camping.

Naturally, I was overwhelmed and flattered and couldn't decide who to message first. Until I opened the fourth email from a dude whose screen name I can't remember because I was distracted by his profile picture. He'd posted a picture of his face after someone had clearly kicked the shit out of him. He was cut up and bleeding and his eyes were swollen to slits. I had

no idea what this guy actually looked like because he was so badly injured in this photo, so I scrolled down the page to see that the rest of his photos were action shots of his cage fighting bouts. There was a lot of blood.

After careful consideration, I deleted all these emails. That's cool. There are heaps of different types of people in the world. I wish Cage Fighting Dude all the luck in his search for his soulmate. I hope she is good at first aid.

I have been doing the online dating thing for a couple of weeks now. I've been getting a lot of emails from guys with six-packs and shiny cars and bitch ex-wives, and I'm even going on my very first date.

Judging by his profile the guy seems fine. His screen name is inoffensive and he is not bleeding in any of his photos. I have a sneaking suspicion that he might be an online gaming supernerd but have no proof to back that up. In the half dozen emails we've exchanged, he's demonstrated that he can spell so I really have no reason to decline his date request.

He lives near me so we agree to meet on the corner of the main street in our suburb and find a place from there. Casual is good. No dinner or anything that will be potentially expensive and awkward for either of us.

The big day arrives and I find myself standing on the street corner staring at every guy who walks past while trying not to look like a prostitute, waiting for...who? I don't know. We forgot to exchange names. I'm about to start freaking out about this when someone taps me on the shoulder.

"Are you here to meet some random weirdo off the internet?"

"Yes."

You lying bastard, I think. Sure, he still has all his hair and he resembles his profile picture but he's about a foot shorter than he said on the internet. I'm 5ft 1 and not used to being able to look a man straight in the face when we're both standing up. It makes me nervous. Why did he lie about this? Did he think I wouldn't notice the dodgy stitching on his pants where he's taken the cuffs up so they won't drag on the ground? Why didn't he pick a better lie? At least my lie couldn't be called out on first sighting and anyway, it's half the dating site's fault for providing an "occasional smoker" option in its drop-down menu. Everybody knows there's no such thing as an "occasional smoker." You smoke or you don't. I smoke and lie about it.

The date is off to a fantastic start.

So we head down the street to find a bar. During the walk I reveal some important things about myself, like how I feel about the weather. This topic always makes me anxious and

thirsty so I drag him into the Rumpus Room. It's got a not-too-noisy sitting area on the footpath so I figure I can continue my monologue about the weather while getting drunk and making him feel uncomfortable.

The Rumpus Room is one of my favourite bars in the neighbourhood. It's suitably sleazy on the weekends and has no dress code. On the corner out the front there's a 10ft long terracotta lizard with a mosaic of tiles along its back. It's in pretty good shape at the moment. Every now and then it gets its head knocked off by a drunk driver but today it is intact and shiny. A row of homeless people sit on its back.

Inside, the two of us rest our chins on the bar and my date (let's call him Matt) orders some beers.

"You, uh, want some change?" I offer.

"Nah, you're good. You can get the next round."

They're big beers. Schooners. Now I'm trapped for at least an hour.

We carry our drinks outside and find a place to sit under the fig tree. The first thing he does after he re-locates the ash tray to another table is sit down and cross his legs. Like a school child. I'm not smoking in the smoking section and my date is sitting cross-legged like a garden gnome waiting for his hat to be returned.

"So, um." I take a huge swallow of beer. "Got any hobbies?"

"I work a lot."

"Oh, but what do you do on the weekends?"

"I like music."

"That's *great*. What kind?"

"All sorts, really. My taste is quite diverse. I can give you a list in chronological order."

No one's ever given me a chronological list of anything. "Okay."

This is where he gets animated. He grins all his crooked teeth at me and holds up an index finger because he has to get his body into this list thing. He starts with Beethoven, moves on to a couple of other classical composers and I find myself wondering if this is what it's like for Therese on her date nights with Kevin. Kevin's describing the complex machinations of his fellow politicians, waving his arms about while still speaking in monotone, while Therese watches the cat on the other side of the room.

I'm watching a dog. It's digging a hole under the table across from us. I don't like dogs. The combination of unpredictability and slobber makes me nervous. That I have been staring at this dog for a full three minutes is a bad sign.

To his credit, Matt aborts the mission at Dvorak. I lie and tell him he's not boring. I tell him to finish his drink because it's my round and I'm going to the bar. I spend part of the time it takes to drink that second schooner asking myself if I would shave my bikini line for this man.

If you can't imagine willingly shaving your bikini line for a man then he's probably not your soulmate.

Soulmate stars out of five: 1.5

