

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

## Cover Story

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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 endless 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

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

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

But only so much is book learning. The rest is 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."

Down in the dating bunker — Kates' basement 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 lived downtown, a big teddy bear of a guy. She was a delicate-featured 905er.

"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. To 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.