

## More to Love

By Eliza Langhans

Belinda arrived home to find wet boots strewn across the carpet and a mackintosh left dripping carelessly on the bannister. It was like living with a child. Or what she imagined living with a child might be like, not herself having had any experience in the matter. She rather pointedly shook own jacket off on the porch and placed her boots neatly in the closet, then stood for a moment in the dim, having found limited satisfaction in these small tasks which, after all, would be recognized by nobody. She listened for some sign of her sister, but the rain drowned out any noise. Would this be what it was like if she lived alone, coming home every night to an empty house?

Of course, it was not that she never arrived home to find herself alone. Harriet was often out in the evenings, having a drink with friends, or meeting Ricardo for one of those bubble-gum movies that Belinda refused to go see. But even when absent, Harriet made her presence known.

Despite herself, Belinda picked up Harriet's boots and lined them neatly beside her own. The pounding rain and dim light gave the house a cocooned, unearthly feel, as if the world outside had disappeared. Or perhaps it was she who was otherworldly, flickering in and out of her own life like a ghost. Some days it felt like she was barely there at all. A wave of sadness passed through her: sadness for the world, which had seemed to offer so much; and for herself, who had so little to show for her small existence.

But it was no good feeling melancholy. With a practiced motion, she stepped into her well-worn slippers and padded off down the hall in search of her sister.

Harriet was comfortably ensconced on the sofa with her laptop, her knees drawn up in a manner more appropriate to a teenager, and her brassiere—an item of clothing she always loved to remove with a flourish as soon as she came home from work—strewn in an undignified manner across the ottoman.

Still feeling ghostlike, Belinda padded quietly around the side of the couch to where she could see over Harriet's shoulder . . . and was jolted back into reality to discover her sister was on a dating website.

"Harriet? What are you doing?"

Harriet tilted her head back and looked up, so that Belinda found herself staring down at her sister's face, her eyes mischievous. "Oh, B. Don't act like you've never seen a dating site before. I'm putting myself out there! Come on, tell me how you disapprove."

"I don't disapprove."

Though of course things hadn't worked out so well the last time Harriet had put herself out there. Almost a decade earlier, Harriet's one attempt at marriage had ended in Divorce—in her head Belinda always pronounced the word with an ominous capital letter, though Harriet insisted it was quite the usual thing these days and everyone should try it at least once. Of course, Harriet hadn't been quite so

sanguine at the time. It was then that she'd moved in with Belinda, and somehow never left. Belinda had come to think of their arrangement as permanent. Could it be that Harriet didn't feel the same? She'd married once, after all. There was no reason she might not do it again. After all these years, could she be preparing to launch herself back out into the world? And where would Belinda be if she was gone?

Cautiously, Belinda leaned close over the back of the sofa to see the screen. Harriet was in the process of filling out an array of little bubbles to describe herself—gender, age, hair color, eye color—but had become stuck on one labeled, with the unnerving frankness of modern life, body type.

In her innocence, Belinda had wandered through life thinking of people as either fat or thin, or maybe somewhere in between. Now she discovered that there were in fact a dizzying array of options from which to choose. "What's the difference between slim and slender?" she said, frowning.

"No idea," said Harriet, though Belinda could tell she wasn't really listening. Being neither slim nor slender, she had let her mouse float down towards the bottom of list, where the heavier options were clustered. Curvy. Voluptuous. Big-boned. And then, last of all, "more to love."

The phrase struck Belinda with the force of insight; a hint at something she had always sensed, but never fully understood. Could it be true that thin people somehow had less in them to love? By rejecting the pleasures of food and drink for a grim abstemiousness, were they also inoculating themselves from the pleasures of the heart? Clearly there were exceptions to this rule. And yet, even so—it would explain so much. It was certainly true that she'd often felt unlovable compared to her more amply proportioned sister.

But she could hardly share these thoughts with Harriet, who, after a moment's reflection, chose the box for "curvy." I would be average, thought Belinda. It would be convenient if there was one button you could click for average all the way through.

Harriet had now finished the multiple choice portion of her profile and was presented with a small white box requesting her to write about herself. They both stared at the blinking cursor.

"What are you going to write?"

"Oh . . . I'll think of something later," said Harriet carelessly. "Come on, let's have a look at the men."

She clicked something and suddenly they were presented with a page full of male faces: row after row of forced smiles and scruffy chins. The men stared out intently from the screen, bright-eyed and needy, all clearly wanting something Belinda was sure she was not ready to give.

"You'd think they would shave, at least, before getting their photo taken," she said.

"That's the style, B. All the movie stars look like that

these days.”

But these men didn't look like movie stars. Harriet too must have felt dissatisfied because she kept scrolling, down and down, until at last she clicked on a boy who looked about twenty, with white teeth and curly hair.

“See, here's a cutie!”

They both stared at his profile.

“It says his hobby is rock-climbing.”

“Yes, but they all say that. No one actually climbs rocks.”

They stared for another moment.

“Also...” Belinda sought after an appropriately delicate phrase. “Don't you think he looks a bit... young?”

“What? Nonsense.” But Harriet closed the profile abruptly. “Not my type.”

She continued to scroll ever further down in silence, not opening any more profiles.

“Did you start dinner?” asked Belinda.

“Oh, no. I was waiting for you.”

With a sigh, Belinda moved into the kitchen, putting the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher and pulling a package of chicken breast out of the fridge. “Should I make some salad?”

“What?” said Harriet from the sofa.

“Salad? To go with our chicken?”

“Oh. That's fine.” She was still at her laptop, though she'd stopped scrolling and seemed to be staring into space.

“What about Ricardo?” said Belinda.

Harriet's movie buddy, Ricardo, was widely known to be quietly in love with her, though so far Harriet had kept their relationship from progressing beyond the occasional sharing of popcorn.

“Oh, Ricardo. Such a sweetie. But he'll understand. I'm simply keeping my options open.”

She closed the laptop and came over to lean on the countertop while Belinda worked.

“It'll be so much fun, B. You should do one too.”

Belinda imagined meeting some strange man for coffee. Making awkward conversation over a crumbling scone. Forcing a smile at some joke or anecdote she didn't understand. Harriet would be fine—she always found something to say, and was able to laugh at anything really. But Belinda knew she'd be miserable.

And it wasn't just that. The whole idea felt humiliating somehow. What would Henry think, if he found out? Or God forbid, Agatha? Belinda imagined her stern delight upon hearing the news. How common, she'd say. Or, perhaps worse, it would be something patronizingly encouraging. Good for Belinda. Good for her, putting herself out there after all these years.

Belinda pictured again all those eager, needy faces. None had the clear, intelligent gaze of Henry. It was impossible to imagine him on a dating site. Even if he were to somehow leave Agatha.

Not that that would happen. He had his political career

to think of, and Belinda understood. Marrying Agatha had provided him with the connections he needed, not to mention the money. And if she'd turned out to be not quite the right wife for him; if she'd aged rather more poorly than he had—well, that was one of the risks that came with marriage. And it was so nice that they could all still be friends. If Belinda were to date, that might change everything.

With a start, she realized Harriet was watching her intently as she washed the chicken.

“Might be good for you, B. You haven't dated anyone since...”

But Harriet couldn't think of anyone, and Belinda couldn't either. The last person she remembered loving was Henry, and, perhaps out of habit, she seemed to be in love with him still. There had been other men, and other disappointing forays into romance, but all were lost to the fog of memory. Only Henry remained. Henry, who'd held her hand and quoted poetry to her and debated free will and metaphysics far into the night. Henry, who she'd loved loyally and, some might say, pointlessly. But surely there was always some purpose to love? And, having experienced the real thing, she knew she could never settle for some more diluted version.

“I don't think online dating is the best way to meet men, in any case,” she told Harriet with sudden confidence. “The girls at the office say it's better to get out and do things. Join a club, say, or take a class.” She put the chicken on to poach and pulled out the lettuce, picking through wilted leaves to find enough for a salad. “Chop a carrot, will you?”

“In a minute. I think I'll open some wine. Would you like a glass?”

“Yes, please.”

She deserved a little something, after the trauma of the dating website. And weren't they saying now that wine was healthy, even on a weeknight? Assuming you didn't drink too much. Like so many things, it was acceptable in moderation only. Perhaps she had been wise, in her way, to keep her expectations low. A little bit of love had been enough, at least for her.

Belinda moved to set the table, comforted by the familiar sight of the plates laid out across from each other, each with a fork and knife on either side, the salt and pepper lined up neatly between them.

“What kind of class?” asked Harriet.

“Dancing?” Belinda said as moved back into kitchen, her mind half on the salad. Then she realized with horror what she'd said. If there had ever been a time for her to dance, it was long past. “Or cooking?” she amended hastily.

As she said it, she moved to the stove to check the chicken, and Harriet moved beside her, both of them peered doubtfully down at the pale breasts.

“A cooking class!” said Harriet decisively. “We could learn something foreign, and exotic. Thai curry!”

“Thai curry?” said Belinda, poking at the chicken with a fork and determining it was still pink inside.

“Or Japanese! We could make sushi.”

“Hmm.” Belinda could not help feeling, as she so often did, that Harriet was taking things too far. She accepted her glass of wine with a small frown and took a sip before moving to get a carrot out of the fridge. “What about Italian?” she said at last. “I always thought it might be fun to try making pasta.”

“Ooo, yes! We could get one of those machines.” Excited by the idea, Harriet moved back into the sitting room to retrieve her laptop. “I’ll just take a look online to see what’s there.”

Belinda glanced up from chopping her carrot to see that, in order to make room at the table, Harriet had pushed aside the plates and silverware, leaving Belinda’s neat table settings askew and nearly upsetting the salt. And yet, as she watched her sister typing eagerly at the laptop, Belinda found she did not mind so very much after all. Belinda might have little in her to love. Henry, certainly, had not found her sufficient. But Harriet—Harriet with her silly enthusiasms and her sloppy housekeeping—somehow she had plenty. Plenty of her to love, and plenty of love to give. Enough to share. Enough, even, for Belinda.