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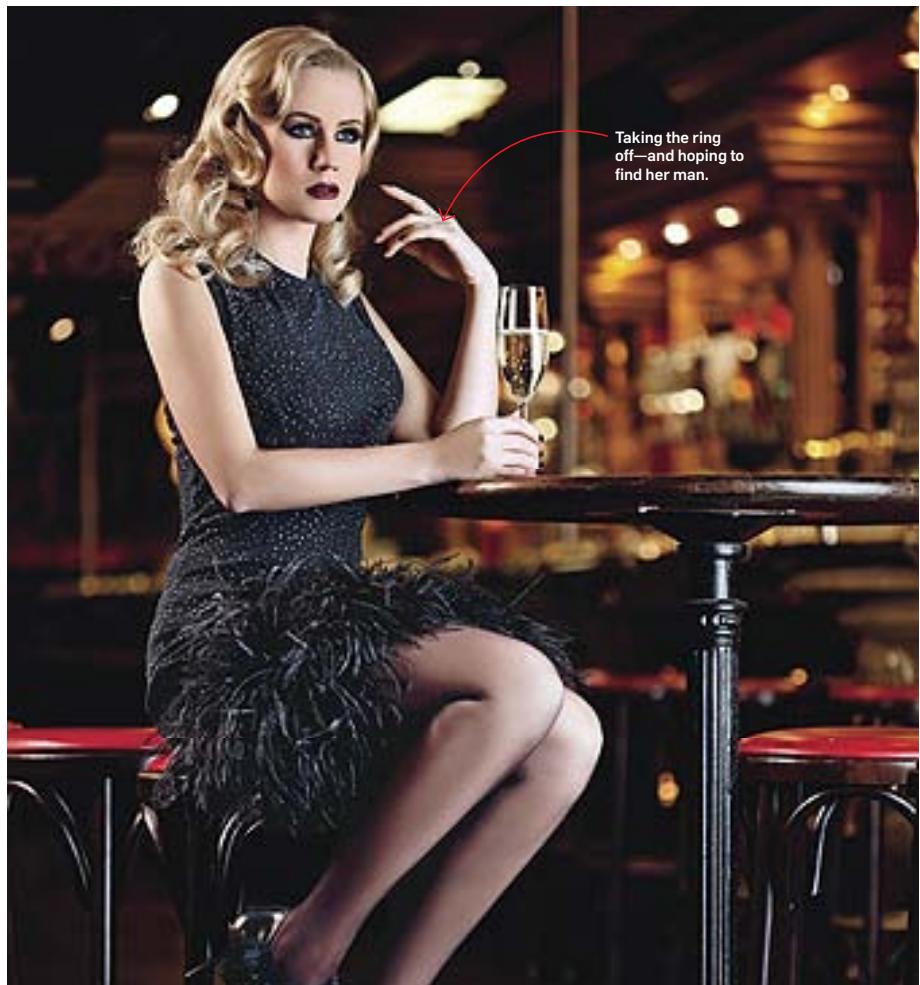
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Is She the One?

This couple put online dating to the ultimate test: They checked to see if *they* were a perfect match

BY STEVEN LECKART

IN A DIMLY LIT WINE BAR, I FIDDLE NERVOUSLY WITH MY WEDDING RING. I fumble the gold band onto the counter before stuffing it into my jeans just as my date arrives. She's lovely. We met on a website that thinks we'd be an excellent match. There's just one problem: that ring. See, weeks before, I had registered on five popular dating sites—and my wife did, too. We passed ourselves off as single, not because we're swingers, but because we were curious. Linda and I met 10 years ago in college, the old-fashioned way: at a bar, drunk, through friends. We've been happily married since 2005; but we also wondered whether, with all the new matchmaking tools, we would find each other in today's dating scene. And what might we learn about our own relationship by sifting through online suitors? (To be fair, my date knew I was meeting her for a story.) But what started as a fun experiment turned into an affirmation of what binds my wife and me together—and a reminder of what threatens to pull us apart.

Lesson 1 It's okay to test

After 10 years, my wife and I still wake up feeling very much in love. Naturally, we have a lot in common: We're both into indie rock, Vietnamese food, and Ray-Bans. I've learned to share her fascination with holiday lights, fireworks, and serial killers. I could write a dissertation on why she hates Bono but loves Elvis.

None of these quirks or superficialities would seem to matter all that much. A friend of mine once mused that when two people are fans of the band the Smiths, it's a sign not of love but of demographics. Fair enough. But in the world of online dating, frivolous similarities really do matter. When researchers at MIT tracked 65,000 online daters for a 2005 study, they observed "significant homophily." Translation: You're typically interested in someone just like you, who likes the same things you do.

That's not to say people don't cast wide nets. A week after registering on OkCupid, Match.com, Chemistry.com, PerfectMatch.com, and PlentyOfFish, Linda and I are bombarded with messages. A 35-year-old single mom deems me "incredibly handsome." A 31-year-old violinist wants to know how it is that I'm "super cute and not taken." Linda, perusing her own roster of Romeos, is "drop-dead gorgeous!" according to a techie in Silicon Valley.

Finding a decent signal amid all this noise takes work. This is one of the market failures of window-shopping for soul mates, writes behavioral economist Dan Ariely, Ph.D., author of *The Upside of Irrationality*. He cites this finding from University of Chicago research: A typical online dater spends an average of 12 hours a week screening but only 2 hours dating. Not a good return. So Linda devised a system—you know, to maximize her cost-benefit ratio. We had agreed at the outset to construct our profiles honestly—not to simply enter intel we think will point to each other. She focuses on guys with beards (just like me!) who hold "solid jobs" (not me) and who mention her specific interests, like old country music (me again).

I'm annoyed. All my wife's likes and dislikes—the ones I've had to learn over time—are right there on the screen for some other guy to capitalize on. To make her short list, all he has to do is declare, "Me too!" More troublesome is the fact that I don't satisfy all her requirements. I'm a full-time freelancer. I haven't held a traditionally "solid" job for years. If Linda were to stumble onto my online profile as a single woman today, she might pass. Parsing through all her suitors, she admits that she'd probably go for someone older who has an established career. "At least you've got that beard," she chuckles. My work is decidedly cut out for me.

Lesson 2 Nobody's perfect

Not surprisingly, the perception of financial security is a big deal for online Julies. In one study, Ariely and his colleagues calculated that a man who's 5'9" must outearn a 5'10" suitor by

at least \$35,000 a year just to be seen as equally attractive. Since I'm 5'8"—and not exactly pulling investment-banker cash—this is terrible news. I'm slipping away from my wife by the second. Sure enough, a 32-year-old Harvard grad who works at a hedge fund contacts Linda on Match.com. A 39-year-old attorney brags about writing Italian guidebooks, baking bread, and doing nonprofit work. In my mind, all these men are 6'2" with park-ranger beards. Maybe I should reconsider going for that MBA.

When my own screening tactics emerge, they suggest that I'm in denial about my age and station. I confess to ogling pretty women in their 20s. Linda rolls her eyes. But hey, their approaches tend to sound more fun. A 24-year-old Dita von Teese look-alike says she's not into monogamy. I'm flattered: I must seem like a guy who's down for whatever. That's not really me, though. All I can picture are endless hangovers, credit-card debt, and public tiffs about dating other people. As much as all men fantasize about being the guy with the cute coed on his arm, you have to know when it's time to ask if that's *really* what you're looking for—and, of course, if you're what those gals really want.

Lesson 3 Jealousy can work

"A guy from work is interested in me!" Linda yells one afternoon. After finding her profile on Chemistry.com, a coworker has messaged her. She ignores him. It's a big office and they don't work directly together. But what if he doesn't give up? "This guy knows I'm married," Linda says, disgusted. I can't decide what's worse—a watercooler rumor that my wife's a cheating slut, or her coworker believing he has a chance.

It's hard to resist a tit for tat. When I receive my first instant message on OkCupid, I'm oddly excited to recount it to Linda. Out of nowhere, I tell her, I'm chatting online with a baby-faced brunette whose profile includes a snapshot of her in black panties, sprawled across a mattress. After some casual back-and-

My own screening tactics suggest that I'm in denial about my age and station.

forth, the young woman mentions recent changes in her diet/fitness regimen. Me too! Linda is not amused. Nor is she thrilled later on, when she catches me looking at a photo of a busty blonde in a see-through tube top. "Oh, you should see this other girl's Santa outfit," I joke. She's still not amused. But she's keeping her cool much better than I am.

Weeks later, we run into my wife's coworker at a gallery opening. After she covertly points him out, I stand up straight and pound my beer—but leave the guy alone. I make sure to kiss my wife at the party (twice). I also delete the pic of the chick in the tube top.

Lesson 4 Love isn't about data

I cannot get over Chemistry.com: The site says Linda and I are polar opposites. Its personality test, developed by biological anthropologist Helen Fisher, Ph.D., is based on a survey of 28,000 male and female members. Fisher noticed that some personality traits could be linked to the brain's use of dopamine, while other traits had ties to serotonin, testosterone, or estrogen. Explorers (dopamine) and builders (serotonin) tended to be attracted to similar personalities. Negotiators (estrogen) and directors (testosterone) sought their opposites.

I'm an explorer: spontaneous and open-minded. Linda is a builder: managerial and home oriented but social. Not only do these two types of people *not* form a natural partnership, Fisher notes, but they are also frequently unattractive to each other. Even though Linda and I know we're in love, neither of us is stoked to hear that our marriage has the deck stacked against it. But I do see how the results of the test actually characterize the ebb and flow of our entire relationship.

Reconciling our inherent differences is a recurring challenge.

Sometimes finding a middle ground can feel like giving in. But it doesn't have to, and it shouldn't. If it'd been up to Linda, for instance, we'd have had a kid 6 years ago. I've relied on a variety of excuses to put off parenthood: graduate school, housing, not "feeling ready," no steady income. But it's not until our online dating experiment that I begin to appreciate the sacrifices Linda has made just to stay with me. Forget that I'm moody or that I'm not as tidy as she is: Making her wait to be a mom is a big one. Yet throughout our 20s, she gave me ample space. Even today, I have space. Instead of forcing a compromise, she's let me come to her on my terms. That bodes well for us, I think. It makes me believe that working through our biological typecasting won't be all that tough.

Lesson 5 Keep your closet open

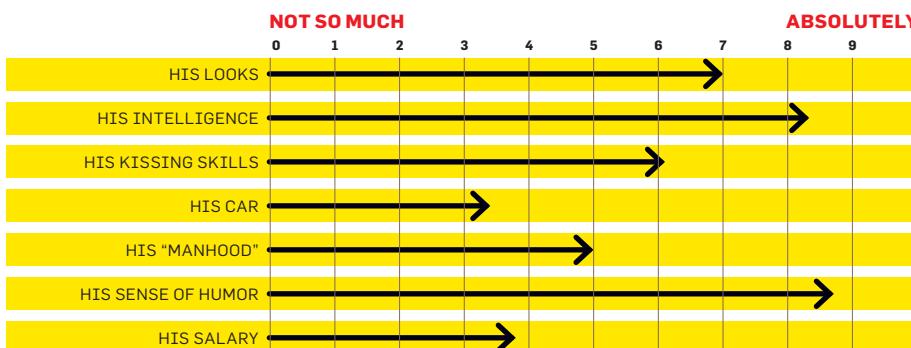
Finally, we meet! PerfectMatch.com hooks us up. We high-five in our living room and head out for our "first" date. Two more sites follow. This seems like a decent success rate. Each of these services has its compatibility algorithms: Chemistry.com relies on 56 questions, while PerfectMatch.com limits itself to only a couple of dozen true-or-false statements, like "I believe in being on time." On OkCupid, which features more than 3,000 user-submitted questions, we made it through 200, including "Do you believe in dinosaurs?" Although it's strange that OkCupid never connected us, we're rated an 85 percent match. That's comforting, especially since OkCupid's own CEO admits that he and his wife of 8 years are a 75 percent match.

While Linda and I didn't uncover lots of shared superficial interests in our quest, we did open our closets. Wide. We found no skeletons. No desires remained hidden. I openly discussed the idea of sowing my oats with a younger woman, and now I know that if we woke up single tomorrow, I wouldn't linger forever in bachelorhood. Linda expressed her fondness for stability and reiterated her hope of being a mother—soon. We've agreed to keep putting everything on the table—something we expect will make us better parents, too.

One unexpected side effect of online dating: The Mrs. and I are having a lot more sex. It's not that flirting with strangers got us hot and bothered. (And hey, our sex life was plenty healthy before.) But after being forced to take such a long, hard look at our marriage, I thought about all the time we've logged together. Our 20s are over. We had a blast, but now it's time for a new adventure. So I'm finished postponing parenthood. I'm over making excuses. And, most assuredly, I'm done taking off my ring. ■

HOW DOES SHE BRAG ABOUT HER MAN?

We asked 625 women which aspects about their guy they most love to gloat about.



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