

Fortyish Professional Woman Would Like to Meet

The day after the Class Four teacher Barbara told the staff about her engagement to Gavin, the overweight but charming man she had met on the Internet, Evelyn Harris decided she had nothing to lose but the hundred dollar joining fee.

Justforfun.com asked for a recent photograph and brief description of herself and the area she lived in. The picture was easy; she had one taken at her sister's wedding two years before. The description of herself took longer than she thought it would. In the end, she was satisfied with "Fortyish, professional woman with a sense of humour, fond of cooking, reading, and walks in the country."

It was practically true. Teaching was still regarded as a profession, wasn't it? And she did like to cook but rarely did, because there was no point in spending hours cooking for one. And forty-eight was still fortyish, wasn't it? She'd always thought country walks sounded nice but living in the centre of the city she hardly ever walked anywhere beyond the park.

Once she was registered on the site, she clicked around onscreen, noting the men who were looking for companionship, soul mates or a good time. She primly ignored the good time men. And she didn't particularly want a soul-mate - that sounded far too intense. A companion would be nice, someone who enjoyed a concert or good film, someone with whom she could discuss the finer points afterwards over a glass of wine.

Dennis looked a possibility. He had a friendly face and claimed to like theatre and symphony concerts. Cultured. He would definitely do.

She ticked the box next to his details and hoped he'd reply.

He did. She opened his email the following day with a quiver of expectation.

Hi there Evelyn darling. You don't mind if I call you darling, do you? I am sure we'll become good frends. You're a good looking girl and I am an easy-going man and have a wide circel of like-minded mates who enjoy swinging together, if you cach my drift.

What had happened to cultured? Evelyn deleted it indignantly. She certainly did mind being called darling by a man she'd never met, especially one who couldn't spell.

The next possibility was Michael, who had a small beard and smoked a pipe. He looked like a writer, or perhaps a lecturer. Evelyn didn't mind a pipe, although she wasn't a smoker herself. She ticked his name, and four hours later, a message popped into her in-box.

Dear Evelyn,

How fortuitous that your missive should catch me at an opportune moment. I was just about to depart for the annual conference on Tropical Marine Mollusks where I am honoured to be the keynote speaker on the subject of the reproductive cycle of the Murid Chicoreus Ramosus.. Perhaps you are not familiar with this fascinating and beautiful marine snail? It is a passion of mine. I look forward to explaining the life cycle of this interesting little creature to you when I return from the conference.

His passion was a snail? Evelyn didn't think she could sustain an evening of conversation about a snail, and wrote back telling him so, in simple, understandable English.

Her next two answers arrived that evening. Evelyn poured herself a glass of wine to fortify herself and clicked Open.

Dear Evelyn.

You look like a nice person with good character and morals. I will tell you straight out that I am looking for a mother for my young children who were abandoned by their other parent when she ran away with a member of a visiting jazz band. My six need a strong hand. I am hoping that as a teacher, you will...

Just because I'm a teacher, he thinks I'd like to have six more to discipline after hours?

Evelyn took a deep swallow of Merlot and deleted that one.

Dear Evelyn, I see you are also a keen walker, perhaps we could meet and have a ramble over the weekend?

This sounded better. A little ramble, followed perhaps by a nice pub lunch?

To keep fit, I usually do a daily twenty kilometre hike across the downs if the weather is good. I believe in the old adage A healthy mind in a healthy body and to this end I am a vegetarian, a non-drinker and a non-smoker.

This I am sure gives me the energy to enter the Miltdown Walkers Marathon every year and I am busy training for that, so my Saturday plan is to walk across to Heatherford and back, about fifty kilometres. I am a man of seventy-six but friends tell me I look half my age and I certainly feel wonderfully young!

Hoping to meet you on Saturday. Bring your walking boots! Regards Roger Nichols.

How depressing! A man of seventy- six who thought nothing of walking twenty miles every day and fifty on Saturdays.

I don't think much of that either, thought Evelyn, and tapped a polite one-line rejection to the energetic Roger.

She poured another glass of wine and curled up on the sofa to watch Law and Order instead.

“I give up,” she said to Barbara, when she found her in the staff room the following day. “You’ve probably found the only nice articulate man out there. Doesn’t Gavin have a brother? I’m joking. I really do give up.”

“I tried three different dating sites before Gavin and I found each other. I’m sure there’s a nice man out there just waiting for you. Yes, Lizzie, what is it?”

A small girl with long blonde hair handed Barbara her spectacles. “You left these on the desk, Miss,” she said.

“Oh my, thanks Lizzie,” said Barbara. “I’m blind as a bat without these.” She waited until the girl had gone. “The kids in my class think it’s wonderful that I’ve hooked up with Gavin on the Internet. They have me pegged as a modern woman! And they talk weddings and bridal outfits every chance I give them and they all want to be flower girls.”

But Evelyn had gone off the whole idea, and when she had another email three days later, she clicked it open with indifference.

Another hopeless, desperate man who couldn’t spell and probably studied the life cycle of an earthworm for fun.

Dear Evelyn,

I hope you are well. I am well.

I am a good- looking man of fifty. I still have lots of hair. I am an engineer.

I like walking too. I also like reading and I have lots of books. Over 2000 of them.

My daughter counted them. She is eight years old.

I hope you will write back. I WOULD LIKE TO MEET YOU.

Lots of love from Maurice Pendlebury, xx

Bemused, Evelyn read this a second time and started to giggle.

This must have been written by Maurice Pendlebury's eight-year-old daughter. It had all the markings of the sort of letter children wrote to their grandmothers as thank- you letters, ending with "Lots of love"

But she must feel that her father needed a little help meeting women. Full marks to his daughter for the initiative, she thought, and wrote back.

Dear Maurice,

How very nice to receive your letter. You sound perfect! I would be happy to meet you, perhaps for a drink one evening? Do you know The Golden Gourmet near Lansbury Park? We could have a drink in the garden outside there on Thursday evening at 7 pm if you are free. Regards Evelyn

Let's see what his daughter does with this, she thought, pressing Send. The poor man probably hasn't a clue that she's written to me.

But she received an answer the next evening.

"Dear Evelyn. I will see you there. I will not be late. Lots of love from Maurice Pendlebury xx"

No way will he appear, she thought. This is all a fantasy cooked up by his daughter. But just in case, she walked down to the Golden Gourmet on Thursday, ordered some white wine and sat outside at a small table where she could see everyone who came in.

And just after seven o'clock a rather nice-looking man walked up to her table and cleared his throat.

"Would you be Miss Harris? Maurice Pendlebury." He shook her hand and sat down opposite her. "I'm Lizzie's father. I don't think we've met," he continued. "I never seem to get the time to come to these meetings, but Lizzie insisted."

"I'm happy to see you." Evelyn smiled, wondering what he was talking about. His greying hair needed trimming and there was a button missing on his jacket cuff, but he had an open, honest face and a twinkle in his eye.

"I must say it's a great idea to hold the parent-teacher evenings at a pub instead of the classrooms. Was this your idea?"

"Not exactly."

"But it's much more relaxed this way."

"So much easier to talk and get to know each other," she agreed.

"I didn't know you were my daughter's teacher," he continued. "Seems things have moved on since I was a kid. In a good way." He smiled at her rather diffidently and she caught the friendly gleam of approval in his grey eyes.

"Well, what can you tell me about Lizzie's progress?" he asked. "Since her mother died last year she seems a little lost, although as far as I know, she always does her homework."

"Mr Pendlebury." Evelyn took a deep breath. "You have a wonderful daughter. She's extremely quick to catch on to any new idea, her computer skills are excellent, and she is what I would call a lateral thinker. You should be very proud of her."

"I am," he smiled.

"And she's very concerned about you. She's worried that you might be feeling lonely."

"Oh, dear." He sighed. "Lizzie's a lovely, caring kid and very perceptive. I know she misses her mother. But I don't have the time for a social life I'm afraid."

"There are lots of people in the same lonely boat. So - you stay at home, reading your two thousand books?"

He looked startled.

“Well, I am a great reader,” he said. “But –“

“Maurice,” she said. “Why not get yourself a drink because I have a little story to tell you. And you can call me Evelyn.”