

# Dating The Enemy

by Lauren Henderson

We treat the people we want to love like adversaries.

"You can't trust what people say any more," says my friend David. "Everyone knows now what people want to hear. We all know exactly how to show the socially acceptable sides of ourselves. Don't listen to what they say. Watch what they do. They can't disguise that."

David gave me that advice when I first moved to New York. I thought he sounded as paranoid as a character from a horror film telling the others how to spot the aliens. But he was right. We're fighting for our emotional lives. Guides to dating rules might as well be called Lao Tsu's Art Of War. As soon as you let down your guard they knife you. Then you crawl back to your friends to have your wounds licked while they analyse where you went wrong and what was going through your attacker's head, with the finely-honed skills of thirty-somethings who have paid extortionate amounts already to have their sensitive psyches probed by Upper East Side analysts.

We dress in grey and black and khaki. Combat trousers, big sweaters, bags strapped across our chests so that our hands are free to defend ourselves. The bare minimum of makeup. Big ugly rubber-soled shoes, in which we can run away from trouble. Our one sign of frivolity is the occasional bright, lace-trimmed, thermal vest. And pretty underwear, seen, alas, mostly by ourselves. We are urban survivors, striding across concrete pavements, ducking and weaving to avoid being elbowed by passing strangers who think we're in their path, dodging cycle delivery men riding the wrong way down one-way streets, navigating through subway systems and a network of late-night bars where we drink too many martinis and smoke too many cigarettes to forget the last person who looked like they could be the one and turned out to be a liar on a quick break from their ex.

We spend a fortune on cabs.

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Case study one: Paola goes out for a drink with friends and bumps into a guy she nearly had a fling with at a work conference a few months ago. They fooled around but she didn't actually sleep with him because they're on the same work network. He's younger than she is and lower down the pecking order - she was nervous of the gossip. By not actually having sex with him she could keep her options open.

All good excuses. Actually she was scared.

So now here he is again, keen, handsome, attentive and making it clear that he still wants to sleep with her. A sure thing. And, from the fooling around, she assumes that the sex will be excellent. But she's out with a couple of people from work, and they know him. No way is she going to let down her guard, show that she wants to take him home, with the danger that it won't work out and that word will get around: it might make her vulnerable. What if he only wants her for sex? If they were both going in the same direction at the end of the night they could share a cab; but they aren't. So she lets it go.

He asks her to ring him. She says she will. She won't. It's too close to home. Think of the risks.

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We are perpetually sensitised to possibility. Phrases of cheap music run through our heads; we're always at the stage where they're meaningful. Even the most banal lyrics seem directly applicable to our current tortured situation.

*"If only you were here tonight  
I know that we could make it right..."*

We would die rather than confess to liking the singers; our images demand that we be listening to the latest hip bootleg remix, not trashy sentimental pop.

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"If you chase someone you like," says Phil, "then you can be the one to dump them after you have sex."

"Go for the ugly guys," says Paola. "They're much more grateful."

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Case study two: Laura's the only one of our fighting unit in a relationship. She loves Skip and he loves her. He keeps asking her to marry him. They met four years ago and spent the first few months fucking each other's brains out. Laura ate like a horse and lost five pounds. After a year they decided to move in together. Both of them were ecstatic. The first night they spent in their new apartment, Skip rolled over with his back to her and said that he was really tired. That was it. They've hardly had sex since. It's been over a year.

She tried to talk to him about it but every time he had a different excuse. He was stressed at work, he'd overdone it at the gym, now that they were living together

they were going to have to get used to not having sex every single night. Gradually the excuses faded away, to be replaced by what turned out to be a manifesto. Why did sex matter that much anyway? Surely what mattered was how much they loved each other? Most people had much less sex than they boasted about, after all. They were just another normal couple. Laura shouldn't get so worked up about this. Hadn't she heard the story about the jar full of coins?

And every so often he would have sex with her, when he sensed that the strain of celibacy was becoming unbearable. The night before last had been one of those times.

"Pity fuck," says Phil.

"Relationship-maintenance fuck," I correct.

"Well, no. The trouble is," Laura says helplessly, "is that it was *good*. You know what I mean? It wasn't a let's-get-this-over-with-so-she-can't-complain-for-another-few-months fuck. It was like the old times. That's the thing. Nothing's changed. And that just makes it worse. I mean, he can still do it like that, so why doesn't he?"

"Would you have preferred it to be perfunctory and loveless?" David enquires.

"You're going through the motions but you don't really care," Paola sings, a snippet of an old song that's just been covered and remixed within an inch of its life over the latest stripped-down, kicking dance beat, the original singer long forgotten.

"No, he did care, he does care," Laura says miserably. "And yeah, I *would* much rather the sex was crap. At least I could say, OK, that side of things is over, and deal with it. But when it's that good, it's like he's keeping me on a string. Doling out something from time to time just so I keep from starving completely."

"You do have that I-had-good-sex-recently glow," David observes.

"Yeah, what's your problem, bitch?" I say jokingly. "You had great sex the night before last! That's probably more recent than anyone round this table!"

Laura shoots me a foul look. But so does everyone else.

"What's the jar full of coins thing?" Phil asks.

Three of us start to speak at once. David makes it through.

"That if you put a coin in a jar for each time you have sex the first year in a marriage, and take one out every time you have sex after that, the jar'll still have coins in it when you die."

"Whoah," Phil says. "That's why I'm never getting married."

This is a complete bluff, a moment of machismo. Phil would love more than anything to get married. We all know this so well that no-one bothers to call him on it.

"Look," Paola says to Laura, her voice sober. Clearly she has decided to be the voice of reason. "It'll never get much better. You've got two choices: leave him or have affairs. I think you should have affairs. Bet he never asks questions. Shit, he'll probably be grateful."

"Well-concealed commitment issues," says David, grave as a doctor diagnosing a fatal disease. "That's a tough one."

"Maybe he's depressed," says Phil. "That's the first thing to make a guy lose his woody. The trouble is even the new anti-depressants don't exactly up your libido."

We all look at Phil.

"Yeah," he says. "But you know the thing is, I don't care! I'm so happy on my Prozac right now I don't care if I ever get laid again!"

We all edge back in the booth like vampires who have just spotted a clove of garlic in the middle of the table.

"We'll do that one later," Paola decides. "Right now we're still on Laura."

"I'm scared of rocking the boat," Laura says. "The rest of the time it's so perfect. And maybe if we get married it'll get better."

We all laugh sardonically. Laura has talked about this problem enough times that we are allowed to find this amusing.

"What makes you think that?" David looks weary. We have all had this conversation with her, over and over again. "If moving in together fucked up the sex, then marriage'll be ten times worse."

"But it's so perfect in every other way," Laura repeats hopelessly. "I mean, I don't have to tell you guys that."

We all know and love Skip. He's funny, sweet and dealt very well with the trial-by-fire of meeting Laura's friends. He has a nice job which he enjoys and is good-looking without being so unnecessarily handsome that other women hit on him all the time or are automatically hostile to his girlfriend. He's easy-going, not a slob, and obviously adores

Laura. Your ideal man. As a gay best friend.

"What happens if I do leave him?" Laura is so scared by the thought she can barely get the words out. "Back on the street again, out there in dating hell..." She shivers. "No offence, you guys..."

We shrug to show that none has been taken.

"You all know what I went through before I met Skip. I honestly don't think I can do that again. My God, I'll be single for the rest of my life."

Laura doesn't actually say it; she knows we'd shoot her down. But we can see her thinking it. Better a stable relationship with a guy who loves her, the social certainties of being in a couple, the end to loneliness, than our nocturnal, bar-crawling existence, our latest reports from the war front.

I can't blame her.

"Is he getting it anywhere else?" asks Phil. Prozac has not managed to suppress his cynicism.

This is the first time anyone has put this question to Laura. She looks shell-shocked.

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We don't know how to advise Laura, or anyone with long-term relationship problems. No-one does, apart from our shrinks. Long-term relationships require patience, compromise and faith, and we are familiar with none of the above. Indeed, we see them all as signs of weakness.

"I hung on, hoping she'd change," one of us will say feebly, and the others will expel their breath in tight hisses from clenched teeth, like the last puffs of a milk frother making cappuccino. In our world, you never hang on. You explain that the person's behaviour is unacceptable, that they have breached your tolerance limit, that you value yourself too much to put up with their latest sin of omission or commission, and you move on, head held high. Your friends applaud: you have done the right thing.

We are terrified of being like our parents, either trapped in unhappy marriages or undergoing bloody, prolonged divorces. We all remember what those felt like, our limbs strapped to four horses all running in different directions. Even now we are barely managing to put the pieces together again, with the help of the aforementioned expensive therapists. No way are any of us getting into that kind of mess ourselves. Our parents' pathetic excuses for the misery we went through are

still vivid to us. The lesson we have learned is never to put up with anything. Any signs of trouble and we're out of there.

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We are all desperate to be in love. But we are still more desperate to hide it. So for pride's sake, we pretend, to ourselves and others, that it's all about sex instead.

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I'm waiting for Ivan to call. It's been a week now and my stomach is processing food faster than I can eat it. I'm chainsmoking and ringing my friends constantly to discuss what might have gone wrong on the date that would mean he wouldn't want to see me again.

"Go to bed with someone else," says David. "It's perfect. You distract yourself and then, when he does call, you can be really cool."

"What, just go and pick some guy up in the bar on the corner?" I say sarcastically.

"You must know someone... What about that guy you were seeing a couple of months ago?"

"Seamus?"

"He was really into you, wasn't he?"

"Yeah," I say smugly. "Took him ages to stop calling."

"And the sex was good, wasn't it?"

"Great," I confirm. "It was the conversation that was the problem."

"Well, that's perfect!" David says enthusiastically. "Call him up right now and tell him to come over because you need to get laid. If a woman I'd been seeing gave me a call like that I'd be ecstatic. Even if I was busy, or dating someone else, I'd be ecstatic."

"Wouldn't you think I was a slut?" I ask.

David is my, and many other women's, Official Man. We touch base with him to see what men are really thinking. The trouble is that he tells us.

"No way. I'd be hugely flattered and I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about you. So ring him."

"Oh David," I whine, "I can't. He's only just stopped calling. It would be cruel, it would give him false hope."

I am very nervous at the thought of seeing Seamus again, reading that happiness in his eyes, his pleasure at seeing me. It makes me feel horribly guilty.

"Bullshit. Just be straight with him. Tell him you don't want to date him but the sex was fabulous and you want to get laid."

"You'd never do something like that yourself," I say. "It's all very well advising other people to do it."

Silence. My phone beeps.

"David, I have another call, hold on - "

I switch over. It's Paola. I tell her I'll call back.

"Was it Ivan?" David says.

"No," I say miserably.

We observe a moment's silence, as if in mourning.

"Anyway, I feel really bad about the way I treated Seamus," I say.

I do feel bad. But also, shameful though it is to admit it, I am cheered up just a little by the knowledge that, while I am pining for Ivan, someone else is doing the same for me. "Here I am complaining about Ivan not ringing, just disappearing like this - "

"You don't know that," says David, automatically reassuring. "He might just be busy at work. You know girl time is very different from boy time."

" - and that's exactly what I did to Seamus."

"You haven't had sex with Ivan yet."

"Well, that makes what I did to Seamus even worse. I never returned his calls. I was a real bitch. And now I'm whining about someone doing that to me. I don't deserve Ivan to ring me back."

"Hey." David's voice sharpens. "It's all tactics. Remember that. You didn't promise Seamus anything, did you?"

It's a rhetorical question: he knows the answer already.

"So there's no guilt," he continues. "You didn't break any promises."

"I could at least have told him what was going on."

David sounds very weary now.

"Forget the conscience," he says. "That isn't how it works. You know that."

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Our pockets are full of matchboxes from bars we can't even remember, hangouts we have been swept along to at three in the morning by groups of people we don't know that well. It's not so much that we think if we stay out till dawn we might finally stumble across The One, bleary-eyed and blinking, like us, in the daylight; no, we want to postpone the moment of going home alone to our single-bedroomed apartments until we're too drunk or tired, or both, to be anything but grateful that there are no witnesses waiting up to see the state in which we stagger through the front door, throwing our keys clumsily at the hall table and missing.

We are in our thirties. We all earn plenty of money and have only ourselves to spend it on. We are very spoilt. We know we're spoilt, but it doesn't make us feel any better.

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Paola's on a radical diet. She's decided that she needs to lose ten pounds. Paola probably does need to lose ten pounds, but we're worried about her reasons - she's frantic to get a steady boyfriend - and her methods, which are frighteningly drastic. All she's eaten for the last three weeks are meal-substitute bars and the occasional piece of fruit. And she's taken up circuit training.

"Her body is just not up to this," Laura says. "I mean, think of the shock to the system!"

"Not as much of a shock as it would be if she gave up drinking," I say.

We exchange a glance. This is the trouble. The one vice Paola is allowing herself is alcohol. She's drinking as much as ever, only now with much less in her stomach to soak it up. As if to compensate for the deprivation through which she's putting herself, she eats her meal bar and then comes out with us to consume the same amount of cocktails that she did when she was still packing away heaped platefuls of comfort food. Every night we have to practically mop her up off the floor and pour her into a cab.

The reason Paola doesn't have a boyfriend is that she gets off with men practically as soon as she meets them. She hasn't been on a first date in the last couple of years which didn't end, at least, with a tongue sandwich fumble in the back of a cab. Mostly, this city being a brutal arena in which women who give away too much too soon are seen as weak, the men never call her again. But sometimes they do. In which case she decides that they must be desperate. Why would they want a fat girl otherwise?

Paola isn't fat by any standards but the near-anorexic ones of this city. One would think that the legions of men who keep asking her out would eventually convince her that she's attractive, but it doesn't seem to work that way. Instead the way she behaves towards them creates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"She blames everything on her weight because it's easier that way," Laura says.

I agree. "But if she loses it, what's her excuse going to be?"

"That's the problem," Laura says darkly. "I'm sure that's why she's getting so drunk."

"Fear of not having anything to hide behind."

"Exactly."

"Oh, fuck," I say selfishly. I have enough to deal with right now without the prospect of a hundred and twenty pound Paola in deep existential crisis.

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Case study three: Ivan seemed perfect. A friend of a friend, highly recommended. Attentive, funny, sweet, caring, good job, nice apartment. Someone older than me, stable, a rock in high seas. For every question I ask about him he asks ten about me. We go to bed, and it's wonderful. He rings me the next day. We're making plans for the next few weeks. Then nothing. Two weeks later, I finally get a phone call, telling me that he's hooked up with an ex-girlfriend; they'd had problems that they've now resolved. And - the clincher - she's madly in love with him.

"He's trying to set up a competition between the two of you," says David.

"What's this madly in love thing?" says Laura. "What are you supposed to say - I love you more? You've only known him a few weeks!"

"You should have said: What are you really telling me?" says my therapist. "Think more about your own emotions and less about his."

"What's his emotional history?" says Paola. "Has he been married? Lived with anyone? For how long? What do you mean, you didn't ask him? You've always got to find that out! If a guy's hitting forty and he's never been married or lived with anyone, he has serious issues to resolve."

I realise that I am very, very tired. I go to bed instead of hitting the bars with my posse and I sleep for twelve hours straight. I don't feel that much better in the morning but at least I don't have a hangover. Maybe this is a new start.

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Yesterday I was walking down Fifth Avenue, listening to my iPod, when a wash of peace flooded through me. I felt invisible, or at least transparent. I wanted to open my arms wide and stand there, letting people walk through me as if I were a ghost. It was wonderful. Does that mean I don't care any more? That would be such a relief.

"Typical of you to have a Zen breakthrough on the middle of Fifth Avenue," Laura says.

"I know!" I say. "And I wasn't even outside Gucci!"

"What does your shrink think about it?" she says curiously.

"I haven't told her yet," I admit. "I'm keeping it to myself."

And as I say this, I realise how good it feels. Maybe I shouldn't even have told Laura. For three years I've had this tight little support group - David, Laura, Paola, Phil; we recount every last detail about our lives, we play back crucial scenes to each other as easily as we hit the instant-replay button on our TiVOs. We're the safety net, and everyone outside is the enemy. And now I wonder how much it's actually helping. Perhaps I should start keeping more things to myself. I don't know if it would help, but it might be worth trying.

Something has to change, after all. Maybe I'll start with this.