



# THE **DATING** game

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DATE ...

WHEN YOU'RE HIV-POSITIVE

By May Samuelle as told to Kathryn Madden

It can be daunting at the best of times, but what is it like looking for love when you're in a wheelchair or a former reality TV villain? Four women spill on their unique dating lives

In retrospect it made sense. My ex's health was always up and down; he was an asthmatic, always getting colds. But when my GP told me I was HIV-positive back in 2009, I was shocked. I didn't sleep for two weeks. I was 25, finishing uni and had just come out of a three-year relationship. My ex had no idea he'd – or we'd – been living with the virus.

It took me 18 months to make sense of it. I educated myself about HIV in Australia and what it means for women. I knew things would be fine – I didn't have any symptoms and my viral load was very low. The doctors reassured me I was going to live for a long time, and that it was unlikely I'd pass HIV onto a partner. But they still emphasised I should use protection during sex.

When I decided I was ready to date again, I was scared because I didn't know how guys would react. When do you tell someone you have HIV? Right away? Or once you've gained their trust? I hoped if I remained positive about my situation, they'd be positive too.

The first guy I told looked at me and said, "Oh, you've got AIDS." The second one felt sorry for me – but not in a good way. He viewed me as a victim. With others I'd see something in their body language change, and then I'd never hear from them again. I was shattered. I thought: "Am I this dirty person, dying, and no-one wants me now?" I felt ashamed that people were viewing me like that. I knew I wasn't going to die,

but that was their view. Some guys would freak out because of the no-sex-without-protection thing. Having sex with a condom was a constant reminder to them that I had HIV.

I kept telling myself that HIV didn't define me – it was just a condition, and a lot of people have different health conditions. It took a lot of practice, counselling and meeting with other women through the Positive Women organisation, but I developed coping strategies and the resilience to go on.

Two years ago I started taking a treatment that prevents the virus being transmitted, even through unprotected intercourse. Knowing I could have sex without a condom normalised everything. My current partner came along around that time; we met online. I knew I really liked him, but I wanted to get to know him before telling him I had HIV. I waited about a month. Fortunately, when I told him, he was willing to learn and wanted to come to my doctor's appointments (although he later told me how scared he was). Now we're way past that, HIV doesn't even come up. Sometimes I even forget I have it.

Today I'm an early childhood teacher and my partner and I are engaged. I've come out the other side, but it wasn't easy. A lot of women struggle with the diagnosis – not because they think they're going to die but because of how society views HIV. That's what brings people down: the stigma. ▷



**WHAT IT'S LIKE TO DATE ...  
WHEN YOU'RE IN  
A WHEELCHAIR**

By Emily Ladau

Five firemen, three policemen, two emergency medical technicians and the guy you're dating walk into a subway station. This isn't the set-up for a joke; it's the cast of characters in a true story about one of the most surreal dates I've ever had.

I'd been seeing Jamie for about five months, and we had plans for a low-key night out to attend a lecture on the future of sex and technology at one of our favourite bookstores in New York. Leaving myself a full hour to make the 7pm start time, I made my way to the train. As I was born with a physical disability (Larsen syndrome) and use a motorised wheelchair, I often hesitate to use the NYC subway system - most of the stations don't have elevators, and the ones that do are frequently in disrepair. But I knew the subway was the fastest route, so I checked online to make sure the elevators at my stop were working and boarded the train.

Big mistake. When I got off the train and pushed the button to call the elevator, nothing happened. I was trapped on the underground platform with a date in less than half an hour. I jumped into damage control, searching for a subway employee to get me help, hoping a miracle would happen so I could find my way up to the street and meet Jamie in time. Instead, Jamie had to come to me.

He arrived to a team of emergency personnel who were trying to figure out

how to carry me and my 180-kilogram wheelchair up a steep flight of stairs. I was frazzled and mortified, and couldn't stop apologising to Jamie, worrying that I'd ruined a perfectly good date all because of my choice of transportation. Luckily, Jamie is an incredibly understanding person who also happens to be a certified emergency medical technician, so he kept me calm, sticking by my side as the firemen hauled me to the top of the stairs amid the stares of bystanders and utter chaos around us.

But no matter how many times Jamie reassured me that getting stuck on the subway platform wasn't my fault and he wasn't the least bit mad about being late for our lecture, all of the insecurities I have about dating with a disability hit me with full force: I'm an inconvenience. I'm a burden. I'm undateable.

These sentiments aren't all in my head. I've been made to feel my wheelchair makes me unworthy of love time and again. Once, while on a date, a guy told me, "I knew what I'd be dealing with when I agreed to go out with you." Another guy I was considering dating said that when he mentioned to his mother that I use a wheelchair, she replied, "How are you going to take care of someone like her when you can't even take care of yourself?" In that

**"The idea of me might not fit into a man's vision of his ideal future"**

instant I shifted from a potential romantic interest to a problem to be handled, a challenge to be conquered. (Although, the assessment from this guy's mother was clearly a red flag about him, rather than an accurate judgement about me - and the fact I am considered a strong, independent woman.)

Moments like these remind me that so much of society perceives me not as a viable partner but as a heavy load to bear. And I cannot escape these assumptions. When every story the media tells portrays non-disabled partners as saints for finding it within them to love a broken person, it's not hard to see why the idea of me might not fit neatly into a man's vision of his ideal future.

It is true that life with me is far from picture-perfect, but who can say otherwise about themselves? I learnt

long ago not to wish for a fairytale future. Not because I'm unworthy of one, but because what I truly want is a relationship in which there is room for all that is messy and complex, be it because of my disability, or because of the myriad other things that make us real and human.



**WHAT IT'S LIKE TO DATE ...  
WHEN YOU'RE  
WATCHING YOUR  
BIOLOGICAL CLOCK**

By Sarah Sahagian

The year I turned 29, my desire to have a baby escalated faster than Vin Diesel's driving in *The Fast and The Furious*. The mere sight of a teeny-tiny onesie could cause me to spontaneously ovulate. Because there's no known cure for Baby Fever besides making a baby, my boyfriend and I got engaged and made plans to procreate.

But here's the rub - my fiancé and I weren't meant to be. We discovered we weren't compatible enough to plan a wedding together - let alone parent a person. And so our relationship deteriorated two months before our wedding. That left me single, not exactly ready to mingle, and obsessed with the tick-tock of my biological clock.

Then in my 30s, I was determined not to waste time. I understood that single motherhood was an option, but a nagging part of me wanted a partner with who I could share my baby's first steps - and the cost of childcare.

The only problem with Operation Baby Daddy was that I'd never formally dated before. You're probably wondering, "How does a grown woman almost get married without collecting any

dating experience?" The short answer to that is: keg parties. My youthful relationships all experienced a similar evolution: we met at university and became "friends" for about a year, eventually transitioning into romantic coupledness when one of us got drunk and confessed our feelings over text/MSN Messenger/WhatsApp. Soon, we were sharing tacos in the cafeteria and having quiet sex we hoped our roommates wouldn't hear.

**"He acted as if he'd personally invented lentils"**

Those hook-ups-cum-relationships prepared me for grown-up dating the way swimming lessons prepare you to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

My first grown-up date in my 30s was with an IT consultant named Vlad. We met on Tinder, where his messages were articulate and polite (a pleasant change from the steady stream of unolicited dick pics I had been receiving).

A recent transplant from Moscow, Vlad wasn't sure he could love a human woman as much as he did his cat, Anna "Catherine The Great" Karenina. Yes, Catherine The Great was the cat's middle name.

"Does Anna 'Catherine The Great' Karenina have a nickname?" I asked.

"No," he said.

As it turns out, Vlad wasn't to be the father of my children.

Next, I shared a latte with a 30-year-old boy from Bumble, who'd just tried lentils for the first time. The weird part wasn't that he'd gone three decades without so much as sipping lentil soup but that he acted as if he'd personally invented lentils.

"I just sampled this legume called lentils. You should try them!" I didn't have the heart to tell him I ate my first lentil aged three.

The men I didn't date were even more colourful. I once received a Tinder message from a 55-year-old that read: "Hello my dear, you're the sort of lady I've been waiting to sample the new dessert menu at McDonald's with." I'm no snob, but I've never heard of waiting for "that special someone" to enjoy the latest McFlurry.

After 13 months of dating, I became demoralised. I was poised to morph into the Alicia Vikander character in *The Light Between Oceans*,

kidnapping shipwrecked babies and raising them in a lighthouse.

"I can't stand it anymore!" I whined to my friend Karen over sangria. "What am I actually getting, dating?" So far I'd racked up 19 first dates but had

yet to meet someone I'd even consider letting put a baby in me.

As though my life were a romantic comedy, I met my current boyfriend days after my sangria-fuelled rant. He's pretty fabulous:

he doesn't have a cat and he's eaten lentils for years. He wants kids and he makes me laugh. There's no way of knowing if we'll make it in the long term (fingers crossed we will), but it's nice to have someone who makes me happy right now.



**WHAT IT'S LIKE TO DATE ...  
WHEN YOU'RE  
A REALITY TV STAR**

By Jen Hawke as told to Alley Pascoe

When I applied to go on last year's season of *The Bachelor*, I never thought I'd actually get on the show. I filled out the application as a bit of a joke with my girlfriends after too many wines. The next thing I knew the producers were calling me non-stop and I was on a TV show meeting Matty J at a cocktail party with 20 other women.

I found the experience quite confronting. I'm not the type of person who lets my guard down easily, so I just ran amok and tried to have fun. I expected to be portrayed as a bitch, but I never imagined it would be as severe as they

**"People are shocked that I'm not a complete arsehole"**

made out. I definitely played up to the villain role. I pulled pranks on the girls like putting caster sugar in their protein powder. Australia thought I was really savage, but that's not what I'm like in real life.

Now when I meet someone who watched the show, they always say, "Oh my God, you're not actually a bitch! You're really nice." It's a backhanded compliment in a way; people are shocked that I'm a decent human being and not a complete arsehole.

Because of that, dating has been a little bit harder since the show. To a bloke, I can be quite intimidating. Following the show, I've found that the men who approach me are athletes and footballers or contestants from other TV shows. I don't know if it's the events I'm going to, or just the calibre of people who are game enough to talk to me, but it's a weird niche.

I've also had plenty of blokes slide into my DMs on Instagram. There are creepers who send 40 messages without a reply, but they keep trying. There's this really nice guy from Sydney who's been asking me out for the last month. He's gorgeous and lovely, but I kind of figure there must be something wrong with him after I've rejected him so many times and he's still trying.

When I'm out with my friends, people often stare at me. Once a guy literally chased me up the street and yelled, "Oh my God, it's Jen from *The Bachelor*." I don't mind taking photos with fans, but I do tend to keep my dates low-key because of that. Like, I don't hang out in Bondi.

I don't want to be with someone who is interested in me because I was on TV or have 26,000 Instagram followers. I once had a guy who I was dating say, "Everyone wants to date someone famous." For me, that was relationship-over. I need to be with someone who isn't fazed by that. I am an acquired taste, so I want someone who gets how weird I am and then is OK with it. Basically, I just want a deadset legend.

It would help if he also happens to be 6'2" with a lot of tattoos and a great smile. I think he's out there. Just not in my Instagram DMs ...