



# A table for one

With all the talk of a man drought these days, how hard is it really for a woman in her 30s to find a partner?

Words: Sue White

Imagine Drew Barrymore spending hours by the telephone, silently willing it to ring; Jennifer Connelly agreeing to a Saturday night hook-up with a casual fling, despite the call coming at the last minute; and Scarlett Johansson's partner of five years refusing to get married even though he knows it's her dream.

Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo, co-authors of the book *He's Just Not That Into You* (HarperCollins), would have us believe these are perfectly plausible scenarios,

that the names may be changed but the situations are real. And while Barrymore (dating Justin Long), Connelly (married to Paul Bettany) and Johansson (rumoured to be engaged to a different sex symbol each month) are hardly wallflowers off set, the three were evidently attracted to the *He's Just Not That Into You* premise: all feature in the film version that arrives in cinemas in August.

According to Behrendt and Tuccillo, women everywhere are wasting precious

dating time on men who don't – and won't ever – have serious feelings for them. It's time we learnt to read the signs, they say. The ultimate message is one of empowerment, that women deserve better, and no-one's going to argue with that. Or are they?

There's a familiar refrain ringing through single female circles: all the good ones are married, living with their lovers, gay or carrying more baggage than Victoria Beckham boarding a long-haul flight. Do they know something Behrendt and Tuccillo don't? Might there be a man drought?

According to Bernard Salt, the KPMG demographer who sent shivers down the spines of thirtysomething women across Australia when he coined the term man drought back in 2004, we're not imagining things. Salt says the national man drought is indeed legitimate: there are around 20,000 more thirtysomething women than men in Australia at present.

"There is absolutely a man drought, it is a great social issue," he says, noting that back in the 1970s the state of play was essentially reversed. "In one generation we've gone from an oversupply of men to women to an oversupply of women to men."

Salt says that changing global migration patterns have partly influenced the current situation. "In the 70s, migrant families sent men over to Australia rather than women, but now migration is more equal. Plus today, because of an internationalisation of the labour market, men are attracted to working overseas."

It's not just the movement of men that is affecting the situation, says US relationship expert Ian Kerner. The author of numerous books, including *Be Honest: You're Not That Into Him Either* (Regan Books), Kerner says that women's standards have evolved over the years, while men haven't changed very much. He believes that what women are looking for has shifted.

"Women have gone through tremendous social and cultural changes through multiple waves of feminism, and have had to really surmount obstacles along the way," he says. "They have had to shatter the glass ceiling, and have intellectually and emotionally been kept on their toes, while guys have coasted along." If Kerner is right, an increasing proportion of the shrinking pool of single men simply fails to live up to our new standards.

While it goes without saying that we all want to find a partner we truly connect to

and respect, how do the numbers really affect our odds? "In your 20s, there is definitely a 'sheila shortage' in Australia," says Salt. "It's because women in their 20s might prefer a male in his 30s, and men in their 30s often marry younger women. That's good news if you're a single woman in your 20s: you have loads of desperate single men, and more candidates for your affection than you can possibly handle."

But, Salt adds, the statistics turn on women once they hit 30: "Single men aged 35 to 50 are snapped up pretty quickly, and thirtysomething women can often go through a period of disillusionment between 30 and 35, as the number of available men shrinks dramatically."

"Within five years you go from the land of [plenty] to a desert. Culturally that must be quite a shock for some women, and I think that's why there's been so much interest in the man drought in Australia."

The key, says Salt, is using the statistics to your advantage – male or female. "My advice is to work the numbers. Women don't appreciate the numbers advantage in their 20s. Use the fact that there are not enough single women to work out what you want while you have the numbers in your favour. But lock down your quarry before [you turn] 30!"

Tempting as it is to give women an added advantage, I'm obligated to report the rest of Salt's advice: "Men, no matter how good the offer is in your 20s, hold out, because there are even better numbers in your 30s."

Salt does offer some consolation for those thirtysomething women still searching for partners, pointing out that the man drought is very much an urban problem. If you're willing to spend your weekends in places like Gundagai, Kalgoorlie or Coonabarabran, a single woman will find rural Australia awash with available men. The girl next door in the bush has left for the city (making the gender imbalance there even worse). "The Farmer Wants A Wife is very real," says Salt.

Nice for those twentysomethings who still have time to ponder Salt's advice, but what about the rest of us? With all the smart guys off working in London or Dubai, what's a single woman to do, aside from moving out to the bush? Sit around at home with her cats? Not so, say Australian academics, noting that women may be simply looking for love in all the wrong places.

Nadine Pelling, a counsellor and psychologist at the University of South Australia, says anyone wanting a partner should be wary of one-size-fits-all advice:

"From a client perspective, when people come in and indicate they are a bit lonely, you try and problem-solve with them about what they like doing. If they go out and find someone along the way, great, but they need to enjoy what they're doing too: that way you get two birds with one stone."

To this end, Pelling recommends personalising the problem: "Don't just say: 'Oh no! There's a man drought, what do I do?' You need to find an answer that suits you individually. So if you don't drink, don't hang out in bars. But if you like art, go to some art openings, and if you like active sports, join a team."

**"The women who ultimately find good and lasting relationships never chew up the clock by hanging around in go-nowhere relationships"**

Penny Holliday, researcher in Australian masculinities at Brisbane's Queensland University of Technology, says women may be inadvertently narrowing the playing field of potential partners: "We often still operate around the idea of the white knight but there are a multiplicity of types of men out there. If we're all looking for a white, Anglo-Saxon, tanned, fit man; well, it's a bit like men all looking for Jennifer Hawkins – there aren't that many out there. But this is only one of the many types of men that exist in our community."

Celebrity culture only exacerbates this misperception. "Take our sporting heroes: we don't see a full representation of the types of men out there," says Holliday. "We don't see many Chinese-Australian men, for example."

She adds that masculinity researchers have shown that men still feel under pressure to be the rescuer in relationships. "There is a lot of pressure on men to provide at the end of the day, and perform a certain gender role, but research has shown they just want to become friends first. So I would suggest to single women that they take up fishing, or find a sport where they will meet men in a casual environment, rather than going to nightclubs or dating online. [In these environments] there are high expectations to perform, and men may feel threatened if women come on too strong."

Holliday also notes that women have become so sceptical of finding a wonderful

partner that if they meet someone aged around 38 who hasn't been married, they ask: "What's wrong with him?" Mira Kirshenbaum, author of *Is He Mr Right?* (Penguin), firmly believes the man drought is fiction: "There are nearly seven billion people alive today. Half of them are men. If women look beyond their narrow view of who would be best for them, they would be surprised at how many guys do it for them."

According to Kirshenbaum, women looking for happy, long-term relationships should consider some deceptively simple advice: "Relationship chemistry is the only test that counts: the face-to-face test, how it feels to be together."

Her theory is that relationship chemistry is made up of five distinct parts, and that while your prospective partner doesn't need to get top marks across the board, it's imperative that he gets a passing grade in all five areas. Kirshenbaum suggests you ask yourself: is it easy to be together? Do you have good physical chemistry? Do you have fun together? Do you feel safe with him, knowing that he won't lie, hurt you, humiliate or abandon you? And do you respect him as he is right now (and does he in turn respect you)?

"If you have all five, he's Mr Right," she says. "But if even one of these is missing, he's Mr Wrong, because that missing dimension will grow like a cancer and [eventually] destroy your relationship."

For those thirtysomethings mentally scanning their lists of exes, second-guessing decisions to move on, Kirshenbaum's next piece of advice will surely reassure: "Dump the guys who aren't right for you – fast. There is a huge difference between women who find happiness in love and women who don't. The women who ultimately find good and lasting relationships never chew up the clock by hanging around in go-nowhere relationships."

It's a point that *He's Just Not That Into You* fans will vehemently agree with. Why settle for second best when someone who will love you for all your wonderful qualities is out there waiting, if only you weren't wasting your time with dead-end options? Man drought or not, surely it is far better to be single and happy than in a miserable relationship?

Still not convinced? Then it's worth considering something I only remembered recently myself, as I finally stumbled upon the right partner for my thirtysomething self. Despite all the advice, and all the statistics, it really comes down to this simple fact: you only need one. ■