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New Life

Being thrust into singledom is never a pleasant experience.

Especially after a few heated exchanges of words (and the influence of that dangerous species known as the hoochie-from-the-club) took a five year relationship and turned it into a distant memory.

Reeling from the break-up, I spent an entire month indulging my sorrow. My friends, while well-intentioned, were consumed with their own relationships. Since I was no longer a citizen of the state called “Couple,” their get -togethers no longer included me. Fifth wheels tend to be awkward.

Many people suffer from post-breakup loneliness. When we are in relationships, both men and women tend to let their friendships lapse a bit, spending more time with their partner than they do with their friends. Their friends, in turn, move on and find other people to hang out with or end up in their own relationships. After a break-up rocks your world, you end up with a newly empty social schedule and hours of time in the day to fill.

In exile and bored, I turned to the only refuge left to me—the internet.

It started innocently. I started wondering where people went to have a good time, that wasn't a restaurant, club, or a bar. I wanted the urban lifestyle I had seen so often in movies and on HBO reruns. I wanted to be the impeccably dressed girl at the art gallery, holding a glass of Pinot Grigio and intelligently discussing art with interesting, artistic people. I yearned to go to the art house theatre, and watch engaging movies imported from foreign lands with subtitles and existentialist themes. I fantasized about staking out a lounge with my equally fabulous girlfriends, sipping cerise colored cocktails and sharing our dating exploits.

I pulled myself out of my fantasy world for a few minutes. Where in the world was I going to do all of that? I live outside of Washington DC, not New York! I couldn't even get my friends to commit to drinks at a local bar, much less a night out on the town. I spent the next week miffed, and contemplating relocation.

Then, I happened to stumble across a feature by the *Washington Post* (my local paper) that highlights where to go out and what to do in the D.C. area. I was excited by the prospects unfolding before me. I quickly called all my friends and invited them out to a hip-hop showcase.

“Oh, sorry . . . can't make it.”

“I kind of have plans . . . ”

“I'm too tired.”

Bitter, I spent another weekend alone in my apartment.

Eventually, it dawned on me—if I wanted to do something with my life, I was going to have to do it alone. The prospect of going to an event solo terrified me—what if I looked desperate? What if no one wanted to talk to me? What if I ended up bored and by myself at the bar?

At that point, cabin fever was setting in. I was seriously in danger of going out of my mind if I didn't leave my domicile immediately. This was it; I had to go do something. I checked out the next interesting art function and sent out an email to all my friends.

As usual, no one could make it.

Undaunted, I made plans to go alone. I picked out a casual but fabulous outfit with the ultimate care, and packed a notebook, digital camera, MP3 player, and magazine. If worse came to worse, I could put on the MP3 player and look at the art—no human interaction necessary.

On the day of the event though, I was browsing the Craigslist “Rants and Raves” section when another heading caught my eye. Strictly Platonic, I thought to myself. Couldn’t hurt to browse it.

While I had dabbled in online dating through some social networking sites, I ultimately decided against the whole process. People often represented themselves completely differently than they did online, and more than half of the email exchanges never materialized into an actual face to face meet-up. The process was frustrating. Plus, that fact that I was a black female did not help matters much. Scrolling through mainstream personals sites, it seemed to be pretty obvious what men didn’t want. After seeing hundreds of personals ads where the guy was searching for anyone but a black girl, and getting tired seeing the same faces on all of the black personals sites, I had my fill of online dating.

I had never thought about using the internet to find friends, though.

Optimistic, I started browsing the section.

Apparently, I was not alone. Thousands of people were looking for the same thing—activity partners and people into the same things they were. I quickly pounded out a quick ad, detailing the event I was attending and asking if anyone interested in modern art wanted to meet up.

Within minutes, I had three responses.

This could work . . .

After trading a few emails with cool people, I told them what I was wearing and what time I would be there.

At 6:00 p.m., I clocked out of my job and headed downtown to the Hirschhorn Museum of Modern Art. Stepping into the courtyard, I instantly knew I had made the right decision. The scene was full of the young, cool, and artistic. The art installation was wicked. Everything was modern and fabulous, with the piece de resistance being a multi-colored duct-tape installation on the museum floor. That night I met four other like-minded people, grabbed a glass of wine, and discussed art while a DJ played trance/house music until midnight.

I learned three things that night:

1. I don’t like pinot grigio
2. The art gallery scene is the new hotness.
3. This is exactly the kind of life I wanted.

After that, I was fearless—I canvassed the local papers for cool events, and searched Craigslist to find people I was compatible with. I spent the summer out, literally spending almost every night out in the city. I was having so much fun befriending people I stopped trying to date. I was just enjoying life.

For their own part, my new friends were cool. One friend is artistic and poetic. Working for a non-profit by day, he dreams of opening a music and arts center for underprivileged kids in the city. Through him, I experienced the spoken word scene in D.C. and discovered a wealth of underground poetry. Another friend is an aspiring fiction writer, avid reader, lover of indie rock, and works for a non-profit specializing in anti-gentrification tactics. Yet another friend I met is a Latino punk rocker, a vegan, and an independent film buff. Through my friends, I got to experience new parts of the city I call home, learned hundreds of new things about art, travel, and wine, and had hours of deep—and not so deep—discussions in coffee houses, over brunch, and everywhere in between.

Securely entrenched in my new literati clique, I barely had time to blink, let alone think about dating.

Little did I know my next greatest love affair had just posted a note on Craigslist...

[To be continued in part two...]

Finding Friendships

One of the main things people struggle with in their adult life is finding and maintaining friendships. As old friends pass out of your life, it can be difficult to rebuild your social circle. Here are five tips for creating meaningful friendships at any stage in your life.

- **Go where the people are.**

From the internet to bookstores to bulletin boards in coffee shops, people are advertising to make connections with other people. Joining a book club is a great way to meet people, and you automatically have a topic for discussion. Joining a social class—like Bollywood dance, cooking, or yoga—will also put you in touch with like minded people. Be open to the people you meet and try to foster a friendship.

- **Remember, a friendship is another form of relationship.**

You need to treat your new friends the same way you would a new relationship: you have to put the time in. Make the time to call, to invite people out for brunch or drinks, to invest a few hours a week into talking

on the phone. Growing a friendship takes a lot of work in the beginning, but you will reap the rewards in time.

- **Don't be discouraged if it all the relationships do not become friendships.**

Last summer, I met about eighty different people through online ads, joining book clubs and film clubs, and generally being out and about. Today, I am good friends with two, and I keep in touch with four. A large portion of the time, your new friendships will not work out. After all, you are a dynamic, busy person—and so are the friends you are meeting! Be as open and friendly as you can, but realize that people will pass in and out of your life. This is all part of the process.

- **If you want a friend, make sure you are being a friend.**

It is amazing how many of us have had the same friends for so long, we have forgotten what it takes to maintain a friendship. You have to make time for your new friends. You have to be there for them when they need advice. You have to put in more face time with them. You do not have the shared memories with your new friends that you do with your old friends, so make sure you spend time actively creating new memories.

- **Be prepared for conflicts between your old friends and your new friends.**

Sometimes, your old friends may begin to act strangely. They may become jealous if they feel neglected while you are out with your new friends. Make sure to take the time to address the concerns when they happen, and try to create settings where both your old friends and new friends interact. In many cases, your new friends and old friends will get along well, expanding your social group and bring more friends to the party.

Unfortunately, sometimes your old friends may become jealous or possessive. Do not be surprised if you find yourself re-evaluating all of your current friendships and relationships. You may find out that all you have in common with some of your old friends are distant memories.