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These matches may be made in heaven, but they started on the Internet



Romance.com

By **STEVE SHAY**

When you're single, the marketing of holidays seems a cruel ploy to amplify your loneliness, your sense of being *detached*. Just when you thought it was safe to crawl out of hiding after the one-two punch of Christmas and New Year's Eve, along comes the final February blow.

There's more Hallmark humiliation just around the corner: Valentine's Day, with its sappy cards, candy hearts and red roses by the dozen. Feb. 14 is not so

rosy when you have no one to love.

Already suffocated by technology's firm grip on your daily grind, you gasp for one last non-virtual breath when your friends suggest Internet dating. "C'mon, ya got nothin' to lose," they insist. You know that one more Valentine's Day alone may kill you, but, as the song goes, playing with matches can get you burned.

You doubt the probability of hooking up with a

multi-dimensional partner via your two-dimensional computer screen. We'd all prefer to meet our match serendipitously, and buy into this notion with those polished, Hollywood meet-cute couples, like Cary Grant and Kathryn Hepburn, who made finding a mate seem effortless. In the 1938 screwball classic *Bringing Up Baby*, it was a spotted leopard that brought them together.

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Problem is, you probably don't have access to a leopard. Besides, you feel a decade too old to hang out at bars. Internet dating is simply a tool, a way to cast a wider net. Those you meet online may start out virtual, but are flesh and blood and often lonely, just like you.

Baby, you can drive my car

Oak Park resident "VWGal" met Palatine resident "I Like to Peddle" on Match.com, a popular online dating site, last year. Like most online daters, they chose these sobriquets for Web anonymity, and they've chosen to remain anonymous for this story. They match right up—both 36, Sagittarians, love hiking, kayaking and cats, and attend Catholic Church together. They plan to marry within two years.

Referring to her fiancé, VWGal says, "It took me a few tries on the site to meet my match. But if it weren't for online dating, we would have never crossed paths. I always tell my friends, It's hard at first but you might find that right

person." It certainly worked better than the fix-ups colleagues tried for her (she works at the corporate headquarters of a retail store).

"We're perfect for each other," sighs VWGal, who actually drives a VW bug. "We just matched, and never looked back.

Her partner, a graphic artist, chose the name "I Like to Peddle" because he loves cycling, and

hoo Personals is a comfortable fit for the masses. There's also the edgier Nerve.com, its photos depicting Wicker Park types—guys with retro black, plastic glasses sporting goatees, and gals with pink highlighted hair and multiple piercings.

J-Date.com is nationally known for coupling Jewish singles. Or there's InterracialSingles.net, and even Datemypet.com, where you can include your bio-pic holding Spot, and set up a play date with another human and pet.

The first picture you see on most of these sites will not be your future spouse, but rather a stock photo of a blissful couple, perhaps barefoot on a porch swing smiling at you. Think these models are better looking than you? Don't worry, because once you fill out the almost endless questionnaire that may ask such gems as, "What do you have hiding under your bed?" you'll see average folks like yourself seeking someone special.

Warning: On your journey, you might stumble across a photo of your ex with your head cropped out.

Love at first sight

Larry and Maribeth Stein, of Oak Park, met on Matchmaker.com in 1999, and married just one year later. Then an information technician for AT&T, Larry now owns a local Molly Maid franchise. Maribeth co-owned Kate's Garden on Lake Street for six years with partner Lisa Stern. It recently closed. She now works with Larry, and her goal is to work caring for the elderly.

Maribeth, 46, views online dating as a throwback to an earlier courtship ritual. "I got to know Larry through many correspondences. In my mother's time soldiers would go to war and write back. Like them, we could really share and get to know each other first."

She recalls going to a lot of bars before the online idea clicked. "I was getting older and everybody at the bars was real young. It was embarrassing. I didn't have a lot in common with someone 25. It's fine for fun, but not for real," she explains.

When Maribeth lived in New York City, she dated through the personal ads in New York Magazine, with mixed results. She met several duds, she recalls. "I had a date with this guy who took the restaurant bill. He carefully itemized my share. He didn't even walk me to my car.

"Then there were the guys who were painfully interested in me, but I wasn't interested in them at all, which is sad. I'd talk a lot during the date, just being myself, acting a bit goofy, and they thought that meant I liked them," she says.

She developed an exit strategy she'd employ in the middle of a date-from-hell. "I'd have a friend phone me, and if I wanted to leave, I'd say, 'Oh no! You had a car accident and you're in the hospital?' Then I'd leave the restaurant. If the date was going well, I'd say something like, 'I'm out now. I'll call you back later.'"

Larry, 43, says he would always meet an online date for the first time at an elegant restaurant, like Brasserie Joe, the Green Dolphin or a sushi



PHOTO BY FRANK PHILIP / WEDNESDAY JOURNAL. WEDDING PHOTO COURTESY OF THE KNIGHTS

Eric and Stephanie Knight found each other on Yahoo Personals and married a year later. "We established a mental connection before we met," says Eric.

was seeking an athletic girl. "When you first meet someone online, you don't have a face, or true interaction. I found that people in the ads sometimes put on facades. They would get me interested by saying they were very active and worked out regularly. Then we'd meet for lunch, and they were obviously, well, out of shape. That's the problem with the online thing," he warns.

The slender VWGal interrupts, and playfully bickers with her pal: "That's exactly what turned me off, guys asking me what size I am. It seemed so shallow. You just blew my whole theory! What am I doing with you?"

"There's being shallow and there's being honest," he replies.

Clicking in

An array of online dating sites, and access to their members, are yours with a few clicks on the mouse, plus a fee. The cost averages about \$20 a month, although eHarmony.com is higher. Ya-



place. "That way I'd always look forward to a great meal, even if the date wasn't going anywhere. I was never accused of being cheap."

After a month of e-mail exchanges with Maribeth, Larry finally invited her to the Ritz for dinner. She's still puzzled by his delay. "He was torturing me," she suggests with a laugh. There was more on the menu than good food, and the date lasted five hours.

He remembers arriving very early. "I thought she was very cute when she walked off the elevator."

"Yeah. I was late," she chimes in. "I was really nervous and shaky. I looked at him and thought, 'Wow! He's really good looking.'"

The next day Larry went shopping for an engagement ring. "I had a friend who was a jeweler, and asked him to search for a ring, something unique. He found one a month later at an estate sale. It has a vintage look. When I saw it, I knew it was absolutely the one."

Back at the Ritz three months later, he got down on his knee and proposed to her.

A real fantasy

Eric and Stephanie Knight, also of Oak Park, met on Yahoo Personals about three and a half years ago, and wed one year later. Her online name was "Luna Blue." "I don't remember his," says Stephanie, 35, "but my girlfriends referred to him as the 'vampire guy.'"

Eric, 39, a published sci-fi fantasy author who goes by E. E. Knight, has written a number of books, including a dark fiction series called *Vampire Earth*.

"There was the 'sales guy,' the 'lawyer guy,' and the 'vampire guy,'" recalls Stephanie. "Eric bragged about getting his first writing contract, and I thought, 'Well, he can actually write.' That impressed me."

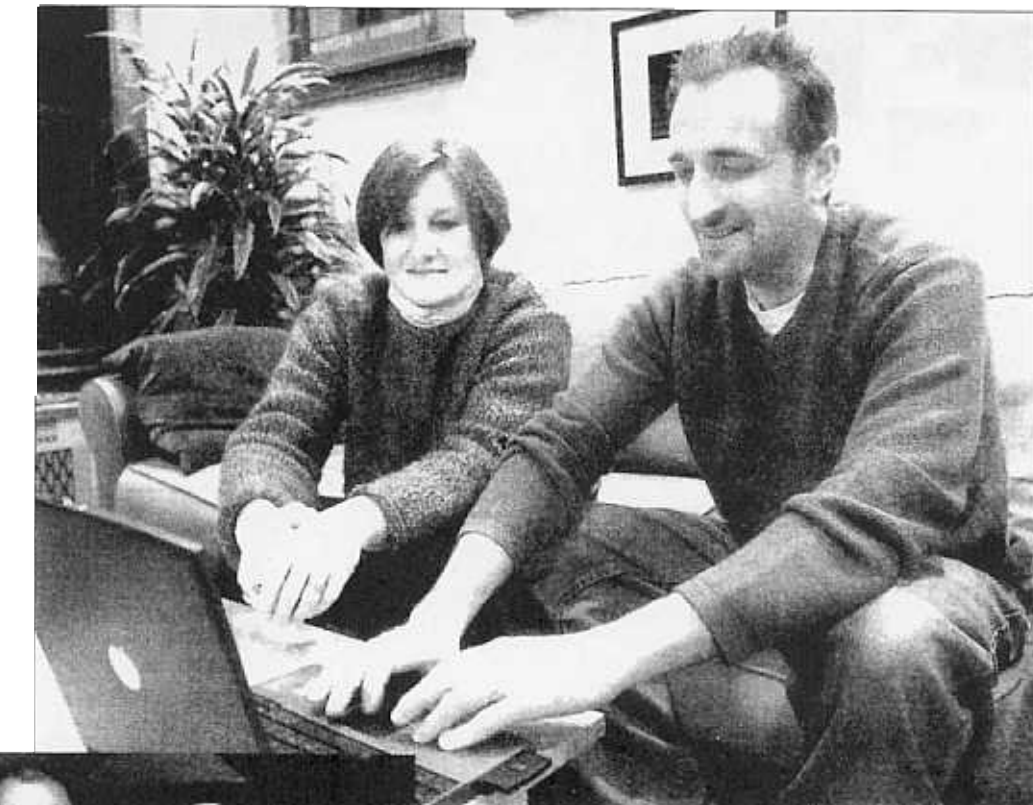
She also did some background checking on Mr. Knight. "She vetted me, I'm pretty sure," Eric says. "She was a research conflicts analyst and had access to a background investigation database. She made sure I had no felonies or arrest warrants."

"Well, I investigated him up to the limit of the law," admits Stephanie, who does conflict analysis for the Kirkland and Ellis law firm. "Eric had a pretty clean record."

She recalls liking that Eric was also originally from Wisconsin. "And my judgment wasn't clouded by too many beers at the local bar," she adds.

The Wisconsin connection struck a chord with Eric, too. They shared a sense of humor, found out they were both fans of funnyman Weird Al Yankovic. "She'd even get my Star Trek jokes," notes Eric.

Online dating, he adds, was the perfect fit for his personal style. "It works for me because I'm not the type who's good at 'being on' in person. With e-mailing I can think, and compose things



PHOTOS BY JOSH HAWKINS / WEDNESDAY JOURNAL
WEDDING PHOTO COURTESY OF THE STEINS

Matchmaker.com brought Larry and Maribeth Stein together. He was shopping for an engagement ring one day after their first face-to-face date.



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Their first date was at the Khyber Pass restaurant on Lake Street, where Stephanie now performs what she describes as "American tribal style" belly dancing with two or three others from

the Forest Park troupe, *Grow in Motion*.

"Our costume is inspired by gypsies. We wear turbans, hip scarves, facial tattoos," she says. "During a show, I can usually tell when a guy is out with a girl for the first or second time. His eyes will be fixed on his date, afraid she will slap him if he stares at all the hip-shaking going on next to him."

Online dating doesn't appeal to everyone. Sean from Oak Park recently met Shanti, from Northern California, through a family introduction. They're both in their mid-20s, and have something else in common. Neither is impressed with the Internet singles scene.

"It's only intellectual," Shanti states with a tone of protest. "Body language and eye contact say much more than words." After she says this, her eyes connect with Sean's, and, if body language is an accurate indicator, he seems to agree.

Still, one reality of the New Millennium is that families are more scattered. With a large single population far from home, there are fewer opportunities to meet a partner through a family introduction. For some, Internet dating fills a need.

Eric sees Internet dating as simply realistic. "It's not like Stephanie and I were both strangers in Venice, and her gondola broke, so she climbed into mine. What are the chances of that?"

About as likely as meeting Kathryn Hepburn walking a spotted leopard.