



"And what's the other one called?"

# DATE LINES

Ivan Smith goes looking for love... or at least someone to hold his hand

**O**RGANISED dating once had the same stigma attached to it as being a convicted elephant molester. Trying to meet someone through a newspaper, instead of doing it the normal way – pissed in a bar – was admitting you had social problems. That's probably why the **RALPH** Editor assigned this story to me.

My brief is to visit three dating agencies, join an online dating site, try an evening of fast dating, and put a personal ad in the paper. I keep telling myself to be professional – it's just a job. Even better, if I meet a girl I like, I can claim the entire relationship back on expenses.



**FOR:** Organised, scientific and does all the hard work for you

**AGAINST:** Costs the absolute earth, so makes finding the right one vital. And still no guarantees

**WHY WOULD YOU?:** You're wealthy; lazy; you've tried everything else

**A**T THE Fosdyke Introductions\* dating agency, I meet a creepy bald bloke called Frank\*. He ushers me into a room. He wants \$40 for a half-hour consultation with, er, a consultant.

Once I've filled in a form – "easygoing and looking for a woman with a sense of humour" – Frank pulls out cards with photos of women attached and asks me to pick my favourites. The girls' personal, confidential details are all there. I haven't shown him any ID.

Frank takes me through Fosdyke Introductions's range of services. At the top, the "Silver Service VIP" deal costs \$6000. Six grand! At the other end, for \$200 they will "keep you on file". The next service up is \$600, then \$1200, and so on up to \$4000 and \$6000. What's the difference between them? I ask. Frank gives me an insincere smile.

"If you pay more, we work a lot harder for you," he says. "If you are on the VIP program, we are always available. The person has access to me at all times." Aha, I think. You're a pimp.

Frank explains that, at the top, they work hard to find the girls who are your closest possible match. The next level down gets less work, looser matches, fewer phone calls. And what does "No photo" mean on the cheaper packages?

"That means we match your details with a suitable lady, sight unseen..." So I'd pay \$1200 for a blind date?

"I'd prefer not to call it a blind date..." But that's what it is. After about 45 minutes, two things are obvious: if I want a straight answer, I have to find someone else; and I've wasted \$40.

\* Names changed

**A**T THE next agency, Vital Partners, I'm buzzed up into a deserted office. A tiny girl called Mylan sits me down. In front of me is an album full of letters from delighted punters saying they'd found true love.

Mylan checks my ID and asks for my height, weight and hair colour. For looks, the options available are "attractive", "very attractive", or "a good personality".

She asks what I'm like as a person. I don't know. "What are you passionate about?" she asks.

I'm stumped – drinking and sex probably won't do. Later, Yvonne Firmin tells me that women like a man to be passionate about something, "as long as it's not the pokies".

Vital Partners claims to have 1800 women on its books. Its priority service costs \$1300. I could buy a car for that – although it would break down a lot. For \$1300, Vital Partners will try every day