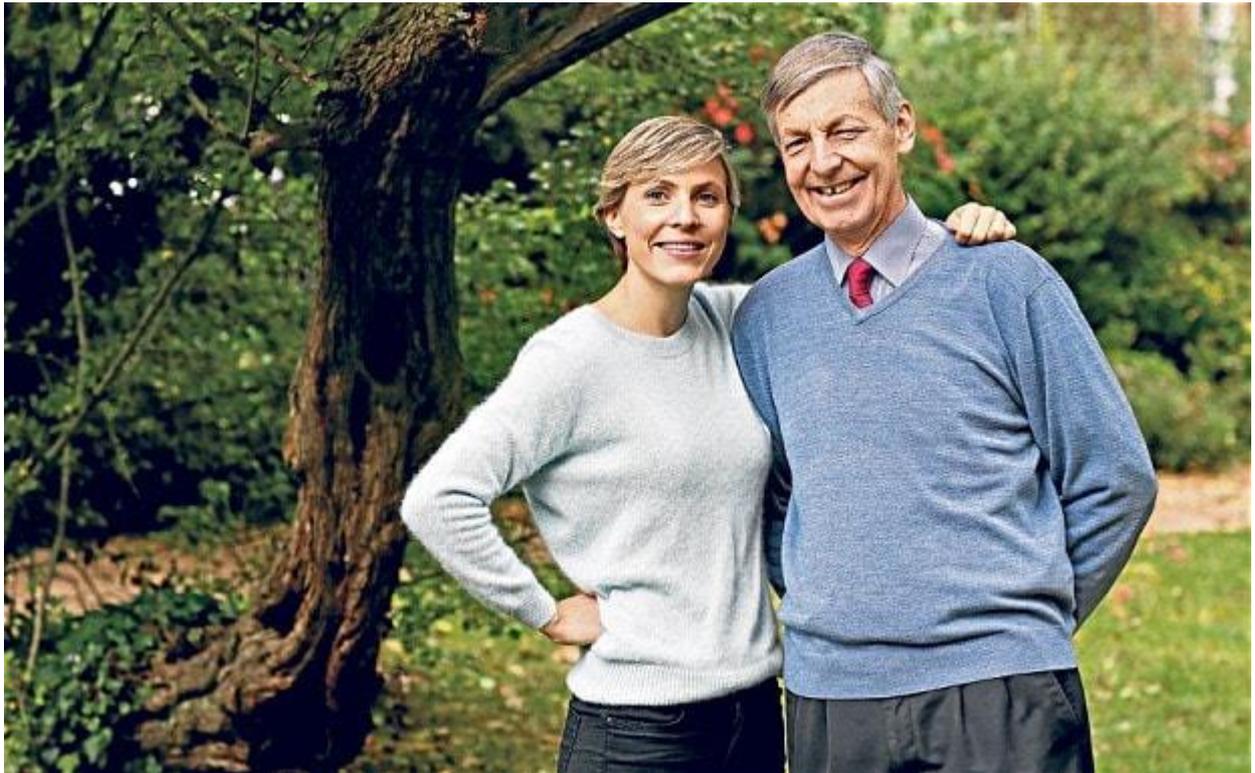


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Since her mother left home when she was four, Laura Pullman has spent her life trying to ensure her father's happiness, including tracking down a wife

By Laura Pullman 31 October 2013



Matchmaker: Laura Pullman has spent two decades checking lonely hearts ads on behalf of her father Nigel : Photo: Clara Molden

For almost two decades, I've scanned lonely heart ads convinced the perfect woman is out there – a kind, cheerful and well-educated Twiggy lookalike. But despite my best efforts, I've still not found a wife for my father, Nigel. The search began when I was seven – three years after my mother left us to run off with her boss.

Eighteen years later, my wife-hunt has gained urgency, as sooner rather than later I must move out and leave my father to fend for himself. Selfishly, I want someone to take over in keeping Nigel company and keeping him fed. It's a role I've enjoyed for as long as I can remember.

For the first few years after Mum left, Dad had no girlfriend and the two of us muddled along happily. Many years later he confided how stressful he found sudden single parenthood, but at the time he didn't let on. He'd march me to school (I'd run to keep up with his long stride) before rushing to work as a marketing director at the Financial Times. In the evenings, supper alternated between tomato pasta and cheesy pasta. Dad's homemade spag bol was a special treat every Saturday, which we'd wolf down in front of the television show *Blind Date*. "Daddy, would you choose woman one, two or three?" I'd quiz.

Although I was already curious about what I termed "Daddy's love life", my search for a girlfriend for him was only really triggered in 1995, the evening we watched *Sleepless in Seattle*, a romantic classic in which a young boy calls a radio talk-show to find a new wife for his bereaved and brokenhearted dad, Sam (Tom Hanks). Annie (Meg Ryan) hears the appeal, deserts her dull fiancé to track down Sam and the two fall in love. I watched the film endlessly, fantasising about Meg moving from the Hollywood Hills to our flat in Notting Hill, and settling down with Dad. As an added bonus, I'd also have a glamorous mother to show off at the school gates. Although I never did go on the radio to set up Dad (partly because he wasn't miserable like Hanks), I was still determined to find him a girlfriend.



Rather than reading the back of cereal boxes over breakfasts, I'd browse the personal ads in *The Spectator* and *Private Eye* (Dad's favourite magazines). Any women who fitted my Meg Ryan mould were circled in red felt tip. Those who described themselves as "blonde", "glamorous" or "beautiful" were immediately shoved under Dad's nose. Not unreasonably, he'd ignore my proposals and refuse to get in touch with any of them.

However, a few years ago, I found myself glancing at the lonely heart ads once again and spotted a seemingly ideal match. I finally managed to persuade Dad to contact this solitary stranger. I'm not sure who was more disappointed when the "fun-loving sailing fan, 56" didn't even reply to Dad's email. "Well, that's my dignity out the window," he joked.

As I grew up, no girlfriend ever moved into our home, and so I quickly became the woman of the household. A headstrong eight-year-old, I took charge of cooking while Dad was tasked with clearing up. The first supper I attempted alone was spaghetti carbonara (with the sauce straight from a jar). I launched a strand of spaghetti against the wall. It was cooked. So, I poured the sauce into the pan without realising that you first had to put the pasta through a colander. No matter. We just drained the watery, saucy pasta and tucked in.

Slowly but surely I improved in the kitchen and soon enough had a small recipe repertoire to rescue us from the weekday pasta rotation.

Indeed, with just the two of us, I became a quasi-wife. By 11 years old, I could knock up a lasagne, sew on school name tapes and was well acquainted with the washing machine. More importantly, we lent each other an ear, a shoulder to cry on or a sounding board. On countless nights we'd chew the fat, often well past my bedtime.

We were proud of our closeness and our motto was (and remains): "We make a good team." Dad and I would also chant this ironically when things went pear-shaped. The Sundays we failed to buy food before the shops closed, for example, and after every long holiday when we forgot (yet again) to buy me new school uniform.



In 2000, our relationship became even stronger when Dad suddenly had to undergo a quadruple heart bypass. He kept me in the dark about how serious the operation was and I happily stayed with my aunt until Dad left hospital. But when he returned home a carer came to stay with us. Another woman looking after my father made me fiercely territorial and I quickly stepped up my assumed duties. I learnt to iron, nagged about his low-cholesterol diet and badgered him into gentle exercise. While I wanted Dad to have a girlfriend, I wasn't having a total stranger look after him under my roof.

By the time I left home to start boarding at Marlborough College aged 13, Dad had recovered. (Honestly, ladies, he is fit and healthy now.) He'd visit most weekends and whenever I was home I'd fill the freezer with homemade pies, stews and curries. When supplies were low I'd phone to check what Dad had eaten for supper. One memorable response: "There's not much in the fridge so I had hot cross buns with hummus."

It wasn't that Dad couldn't cook at all, he just thought making a meal for one was an unnecessary palaver. I needed to find him a woman who would make him raise his game.

So it was at Marlborough where I first attempted to pair up Dad with my friends' single mums. My friend Holly and I still laugh about meeting on the first day of school. "Are your parents divorced?" I asked immediately after introducing myself. She quietly confided that her mum and dad

were right in the middle of separating. “Great,” I replied, “so I can set up your mum with my dad and then we’ll be sisters.” Twelve years later, my dad is resolutely single while Holly’s Mum got married this August.

Although that particular match-make didn’t work, I did have one triumph with this method, which resulted in Dad going out with my classmate Charlie’s mum for a few happy years. (And though they’re not together now, they remain good friends.)

Another sort-of success came after leaving school when I persuaded Dad to go on a blind date. Aged 18, I was working as a chalet girl in France when a lovely family arrived as guests – three grown-up children and their divorced mum, Anna. She was friendly, interesting and pretty – just Dad’s type. Rapidly hatching a plan, I gushed about Dad all week. As soon as Anna flew back to England, I called home and talked Dad into taking her out for dinner. I advised what he should wear (blue chinos, crisp white shirt, smart loafers) and where he should take her (a popular but not overly trendy restaurant). To my delight, the date went fine and led to a second before Dad backed out.

He gave me two reasons for extricating himself: “We didn’t really click and she only talked about herself.” I should declare here that my father is a man who enjoys talking about himself. “Well that’s enough about you, let’s talk about me,” he often jokes. (Readers, I assure you he’s a good listener, too.)

Old habits die hard and I still instinctively look for a wedding ring on every woman I meet (of a certain age, of course) and just last weekend was plotting my latest matchmake with a new friend’s mum.

Recalling Dad’s romantic history, he’s had six serious relationships and a (respectable) handful of shorter-term ones over the past 21 years. But, for various reasons including basic incompatibility and geographical location, none of them lasted. I believe a lot of the blame for Dad’s failed romantic endeavours lies at his own door.

First, his standards are too high. While I’m searching for a wonderful partner for him, he’s on a quest to find the holy grail. He envisages an attractive woman who’ll enjoy his main interests of sailing and opera while also having the same thrifty outlook on life. Ideally, he wants them to live conveniently close while still allowing him plenty of independence. As he is in his seventh decade and lacks both George

Clooney's looks and money, I believe he should stop seeking dizzying romance, be more realistic and make compatibility his goal.

Another problem, paradoxically, is that these lofty standards seemingly disappear the moment a new woman flatters him. Like so many men, if an attractive lady cheerfully listens to all his stories and laughs at his jokes, then he is far more likely to fall into a relationship with them. Pausing to assess their suitability doesn't come into it.

Furthermore, he's become somewhat stuck in his ways. For example, he bizarrely prefers instant Nescafé to real coffee and quietly grumbles when girlfriends insist on digging out our dusty cafetière. I once accused Dad of not compromising enough with a now ex-girlfriend and he indignantly argued: "But I even changed my coffee for her!"

Recently I've had to consider that I might have been more hindrance than help in my dad's love life. I wondered what the man himself made of this hypothesis? "Absolutely, you were a hindrance," he laughed. "In the early years I was busy enough keeping one girl happy, I couldn't even fathom having enough time for another.

"And later whenever a new girlfriend came on the scene you sent a signal, loud and clear, that the home was your patch and I was yours."

Indignant about the second point, I recalled how welcoming I'd been to new girlfriends, especially over the past five years. But despite being chatty and polite to these women, I'd apparently made it subliminally clear to Dad if I didn't approve.

"Just like fathers think their daughter's boyfriends will never be quite good enough, you think there's no one good enough for me."

I have to concede that. I do put Dad on a very high pedestal — but rightly so. Among other qualities he is thoughtful, kind, and wise. Within his wide group of friends, Nigel Pullman's stories are legendary — implausibly long but unfailingly funny.

Yes, it'll be a special woman who I deem worthy of my dad but, 18 years after my search began, I'm still convinced there's one out there.