

The worst thing about Extra Virgin is they don't take reservations for parties under six people. The best thing about waiting for a table is having a friend who knows the bartender. I asked the Formulator about her take on living single in New York. A vicious grin followed by a naughty laugh prefaced her narrative. She freely detailed accounts of what it was like to date younger men, older men, beautiful men, and married men. The Editor had been right when she told me her sister and I would get along. What was most astonishing about meeting this woman was, though we had only met for the first time that night, we were able to open up to each other about our most private and controversial affairs. The latest target on her radar was a guy she referred to as the Poet.

Meditating on her scotch like a crystal ball, "There's no logic behind getting involved with a married man," she said. "But what we have is special, and I'm not interested in a serious relationship with anyone right now."

"Don't you eventually want to have someone long-term, or at least who you can be seen in public with?" I asked, wondering if her answer was about to give me a peek into my relationship future.

"I'm going through a phase where that's not important to me. It would be a bonus, but my lifestyle and state of mind aren't conducive to having a real boyfriend."

"But there are tons of guys out there right? So why the Poet?" I didn't want to judge, but I still didn't understand.

She paused to consider how to explain herself. "I didn't set out to find a married man. He found me," she began. "Guys either can't stand me because I think too much like them, or they become suffocating control freaks to me to keep me in check. There's never a happy middle ground. If I say I'm not interested in a relationship, the guy tries to stick around on casual terms, but his insecurity usually gets the better of him and everything goes to hell from there."

"I used to think having a boyfriend was like ketchup—it makes everything better," I said, as we were ushered to our table.

"But now, every time I hear a break-up, fuck-you song on the radio, I can totally relate."

The Formulator encouraged my second thought with a series of personal affirmations. "I love freedom more than stability. I love coming and going as I please. And I love not having to include anyone in my plans unless I want to."

"Well," I said almost sold, "If you aim to play the field, you might as well go major league."

"Suppose I could I find a guy who's not married. Suppose I should. But the fact that he's married is insurance I don't get in too deep and things stay neat. I want a man who gives me the freedom to do whatever I want and be whoever I am. That is exactly what the Poet brings to the table."

She seemed to have found the best of both worlds. "A relationship without commitment," I summarized for her. "No responsibility, no bullshit. It's so... convenient." But I was curious as to how long she could maintain the affair without someone getting hurt in the end.

Sensing the question I didn't ask, "The arrangement we have will come to an end one day," she answered. "But we love each other enough to keep the friendship above and beyond the golden-time we have right now." Her face softened into a wistful expression, "Better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. The happiness I have now and the memory of it will last longer than whatever bittersweet ending may lie ahead. I'm a better person for knowing him. Wouldn't say I was a better person for screwing him..."

"As the saying goes," I said, "The mistress who marries her lover creates an opening for her replacement."

She smiled. "The gains have more than paid for any pain that may lie ahead. And what is the point of pain? To prove we are strong enough to handle whatever happens. It's my life and I'm going to do it my way."

A phrase Zelda had often quoted came to mind. "One of my girlfriends has the best saying."

"Tell me."