

Sex and the...

...single girl

Laura Jane MacBeth is on the cusp – she's no longer thinking like a singleton

The first months of dating are like a constant job interview. You choose your outfits with extreme care, finding the perfect blend of 'cool' and 'actually wearable'. Your hair is beautifully styled; your makeup flawless. What's more, your flat's immaculate, the fridge stocked with wine and cheese, you read all sections of the papers, suggest gallery visits... It's basically a fantasy world of awesomeness where you're a celeb-model-trophy-wife with opinions and a personality.

Which is sustainable when you see each other once a week. But when that shifts to whole weekends, then pretty much all the time, it gets harder. So you ease off on the grooming. You let the show-flat slide... and suddenly you're answering the door to your boyfriend in joggers and no makeup, amid heaps of untidied clothes. If it *was* an interview, they'd rule you out on the grounds of not giving a toss.

But luckily dating isn't like that. When I asked my new man, PhD guy, whether he wouldn't prefer being with someone attractive who didn't live in the flat of a mad person, he said, "You *are* attractive. And we can sort out your place tonight." It's like he still sees the old semi-hot, accomplished Laura. Even when my nails are chipped and I haven't washed my hair for days.

Which makes me wonder if he noticed the crazed effort I was making in the first place. Probably not. So I've decided to stay 'low-maintenance', with occasional returns to trophy-girlfriend form. And a tidy flat. Because this place is starting to get to me.

Also – *sad face* – this is my last column. Because, um, I'm not single anymore. I hope you've enjoyed reading my mental dating adventures as much as I've liked sharing them. And you're not judging me about the house stuff. I'm going to sort it tonight, honest.



PHOTOGRAPHS ANTONIO PETRONZIO. HAIR AND MAKEUP VICTORIA BARNES. *NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

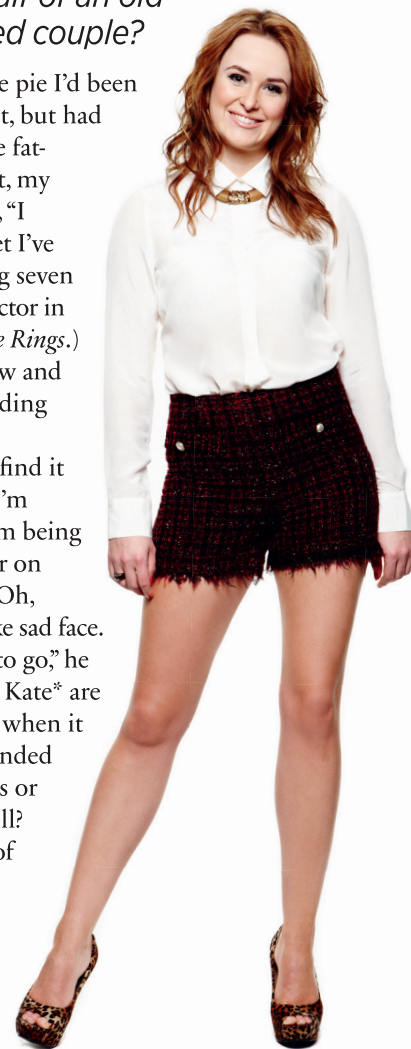
...not so single girl

Is Jo Usmar half of an old (non-)married couple?

As he picked up the massive pie I'd been eyeing in the supermarket, but had passed up in favour of the fat-free, taste-free salad in my basket, my boyfriend Ben simply remarked, "I know you too well." I often forget I've been with him for an astonishing seven years. (I could have become a doctor in that time. Or read *The Lord Of The Rings*.) Not that I look out of the window and wonder who the bearded man feeding the chickens is (yes, we have pet chickens – weird I know); I just find it odd that someone knows what I'm thinking when I'm convinced I'm being mysterious. "I've cancelled dinner on Tuesday," he said the other day. "Oh, why?" I gasped, doing my best fake sad face. "Because you clearly don't want to go," he scowled. Quite true – Matt* and Kate* are claw-your-eyes-out boring – but when it was planned I couldn't have sounded more excited. Can he read minds or does he, in fact, know me *too* well?

I find myself Googling 'stages of relationships' to find out if we're normal. According to one site we've passed the 'infatuation', 'power struggle', 'deal breaker' and 'transformation' stages and are now in 'acceptance'. Sounds ominous – like we've given up battling fate. But I'm convinced we're *not* like an old married couple. Mainly because we're not married, but also because we don't have mugs with our names on. Or a shed. Or matching haircuts. We have been known to watch *University Challenge*, though...

Which probably means we should call it a day. No, not our relationship – the column. After an amazing 18 months, I'm hanging up my column hat (it's like a Viking helmet). It's been emotional – there've been snorts of mirth (hopefully), serious faces (rarely), dancing (often) and a dead man in the cellar (he's still there). Thank you for putting up with me for this long. *waves Viking helmet in farewell*



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