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Back to Relationships : Attitudes

How to Make Friends—at Any Age

A new city and a new job left one writer wallowing in social solitude, until she embarked on a month of platonic speed dating

by Meredith Maran



Photograph: Greg Clarke

I didn't think my face could get even hotter and redder, but as it turns out, it could. "Of course I remember," I mumble. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

I *what*? Is there any forgivable way to explain that I've confused her with another of the dozen-plus women I've met in the past month of desperation-driven friendship speed dating?

No way I can think of that won't cause my blunder to end our two-hike-old friendship. "Midlife moment," I mumble, promising myself that from now on, I'll take notes immediately after each date. *Maybe during* each date.

"So," I ask my single-and-sensitive-about-it friend, "any OkCupid prospects?"

The summer I turned 61, the structure of my life collapsed like a bridge built by a crooked contractor. I lost a huge chunk of my savings; my blissful 15-year marriage fell apart; and the downturn in the publishing industry made me wish I'd stuck it out as a nurse instead of becoming a writer. In other words, my life in Oakland sucked so badly (in a First World—problems kind of way) that I had no choice but to do something about it.

By "do something," I don't mean the standard measures I'd already taken: searching for a job in the recessioned-out Bay Area, searching for a winning lottery ticket, searching for a low-cost therapist. Wearing out my closest friends. Going thrift-store shopping. Wearing out my not-so-closest friends. Joining a support group. Wearing out my mailman. Doing a juice cleanse. Doing tequila shots.

I got lucky. I snagged a job writing and editing for Josie Maran Cosmetics, the eponymous beauty company founded by my 35-year-old niece. The office? In Los Angeles. In a moment that could have been voted least likely to plump up a sixty-something woman's shriveled self-esteem, I said good-bye to my friends, packed up my laptop, my geriatric vitamins and my vibrator and moved to Hollywood.

The job, my first in an office in 25 years, quickly proved to be great—if you don't count the damage to my already fragile ego. I was working in Hollywood. With coworkers half my age and half my dress size. But no pressure to look amazing every single workday or anything. I found a cute, tiny bungalow to rent. In a hipster neighborhood. With cute, tiny neighbors less than half my age and less than half my skinny-jeans size.

But solving my most pressing practical problems surfaced a most pressing emotional problem, and its name was loneliness. With my heart still aching, I was *so not ready* for romantic love. After floundering for a while, I realized there were two ways to deal with my social solitude. I could throw myself the world's longest and least festive pity party. Or I could get aggressive about making some friends.

A friend of a certain age and I are huffing our way up a steep trail in the Hollywood Hills, baking under the blinding summer sun.

"Did your husband get the job?" I ask.

My friend frowns, shooting me a confused—and distinctly annoyed—look. "I don't *have* a husband," she says. "I don't know how you could have forgotten that. Last week after we hiked, you helped me write my profile for OkCupid."



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I was all out of black balloons, so I went with Plan B. I posted messages on Facebook and Twitter and e-mailed everyone I knew, asking if any of my friends or “friends” or tweeps knew anyone in Los Angeles whom I might like and who might like me. To my delight, the platonic matchmaking offers started pouring in.

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night, on weekends, *anytime* during the lonely stretches when their joint-custodial husbands had their kids. The women on diets wanted to meet for coffee, not dinner; the women who'd had problems with alcohol wanted to meet for dinner, not drinks.

The more dates I had, the better I got at quickly determining whether the new face sitting across the table from me was one I wanted to see more of. Great sense of humor? *Yes*. Willing to share and be shared with? *Double yes*. Interesting and interested? Engaged in the events of La-La Land and the turnings of the real world? Living or working within a 30-minutes-with-traffic radius? *Woo-hoo*.

As was true during my last bout of romantic blind dating 16 years ago, I suffered through some endless happy hours that were anything but, and I was glad to be too breathless to talk on a few awkwardly silent hikes. The good news was, unlike real dating, mine was not a search for the Right One but a hunting expedition for a small, select coterie of Right Ones.

And I found them. Three months after arriving in a city famous for its shallow, starved and surgically altered women, I have a dozen-plus new friends who invite me to their parties and with whom I cohost dinners and commiserate about gas prices and gasbag politicians and other social injustices. I also have four new intelligent, truly beautiful close friends—the kind whose couches I can comfortably cuddle up on and who can comfortably cuddle up on mine.

Lucky me: I've been adopted by a modern-day Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein, a couple whose 30 happy years together have given them an abundance of love to share with others and who have made it their project to give me a positive experience with the landmarks of Los Angeles. Their best friend, Paula Marie, booked front-row box seats for the four of us to see Ziggy Marley at the Hollywood Bowl, where they poured bubbly into sparkling glass flutes and fed me a delicious Mediterranean meal. I was prepared to mope alone through my first L.A. Fourth of July, but they invited me, along with a dozen other people, to their barbecue, where I ate my body weight in baby back ribs. As soon as I furnished my casita, they were my first dinner guests.

A Facebook connection with a fan of my last book led me into the coveted inner circle of a socialite philanthropist named Patsy Sue, who had me to lunch at her Beverly Hills mansion. Over mango chicken salad and perfect petits fours served by her live-in housekeeper, Patsy confided that at age 70 she'd packed up *her* life and relocated to L.A. "I haven't regretted it once," she told me. When she reassured me, "And you're young, with your whole life ahead of you," I wanted to kiss her custom-shod feet.

At the end of my first carbs-and-confession brunch with Susan, a writer my age, we agreed that we felt we'd known each other all our lives. Since then, Susan has introduced me to the hiking trails of Santa Monica, the bookstores and cafés of downtown L.A., the wonders of her chicken Marsala and her circle of novelist friends.

Equipped with an impressive list of prospects and an apt aphorism ("Beggars can't be . . ."), I set myself the task of meeting every candidate to whom I'd been virtually introduced. For the next month, I engaged in a blitz of friend speed dating, meeting a different stranger at a different bar or coffee shop or hiking trail three or four days or nights each week. Before we'd even met, I knew things—important things—about them; I learned to read the signs. The married women with kids could only meet for lunch during the workweek—no nights, no weekends. The divorced women with kids were eager to meet at



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When 40-year-old Alice and I discovered shared passions for affordable bars, unaffordable couture and unrepeatable disclosures, our friendship leapt over our 20-year age difference, just as Patsy and I bonded despite the decade between us. By night, Alice and I explore the diviest watering holes of Melrose and West Hollywood; by day, we e-mail each other biting commentary, verging-on-corny inspirational quotes and pictures of good-enough-to-eat baby boys (her sons; my grandson).

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Starting from friendship-scratch in my seventh decade brings complications I didn't encounter when I was young. It's challenging, catching up and being caught up on the 50 or 60 years of each other's lives that my new friends and I have missed. Memorizing new casts of characters would have been no picnic at 30; at 60 it's scrambled eggs on the brain.

But now I have an extra-sharp appreciation for the infectious giggling binges, shopping sprees and late-night tell-all sessions I thought I might have sacrificed when I gave up my old zip

code. Towing my own frailties in my U-Haul of failed relationships helps me forgive the flaws I find in my new friends. More than I could have at 12 or 30 or even 50, I treasure the chance they offer for a friendship makeover, which beats the hell out of the alternative I feared: that for me, the love and laughter of friendship were over.

Meredith Maran is the author of [A Theory of Small Earthquakes](#) and [Why We Write](#). Find her on Twitter at [@meredithmaran](#).

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