

**Spark Hunter: Secret Life of a Matchmaker**  
**by Anuja Varghese**

*Hey girl, heard you're on the job hunt – and the place I work is hiring! It's a bit weird, but... do you want to be a matchmaker?* This is how I got my first job in the city, from a friend of a friend, as a matchmaker for the Elite Network.\*

When I showed up for my matchmaker interview, at an upscale townhouse on a quiet side street in the shadow of the CN Tower, I rang the buzzer and waited at the door, glancing around furtively. I hadn't even set foot inside and I already understood that there was an element of secrecy (or deception) at work here. But it wasn't selling fake ad listings (done it) or phone sex (done that too) or peddling prescription medication in a wildly sketchy cross-border operation (don't ask). I had looked them up and the Elite Network was a legitimate business, and a seemingly successful one at that. Their website referred to them as “an elite dating service for selective singles.”

A woman who looked like a middle-aged Barbie doll answered the door. She was impeccably dressed in a pastel business suit and blouse, with matching heels and a face that she might have peeled off at night and then shellacked back on every morning. Her hair didn't move when she walked and her face didn't move when she talked. Only her too-pink lips seemed capable of stretching into a thin smile as she ushered me inside. Everything from her nose up was dead.

\* Business name has been changed

The woman, who introduced herself as Susan, offered me a bottle of water and then retreated to what had likely been a dining room at some point, but was now an open office space, with two large desks on either side. I would end up working at the Elite Network for several months, but I would never see or speak to Susan again, nevermore be invited into that main floor mirage where clients signed on the bottom line, leaving with their egos well-stroked and their wallets empty, full of hope that the elusive spark they sought was finally within their reach.

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Almost exactly a year earlier, I had been sitting in my boyfriend's car, parked outside of my apartment in Montreal, listening to him talk about the engagement party we should throw, realizing that I had almost entirely fabricated our two-year relationship. In the olden days (before social media), there was no constant posting of pictures for public consumption, no cute hashtags to announce couple status, nowhere to vaguebook about hook-ups, break-ups and make-ups. Our lives were largely undocumented, and therefore, unverifiable. This boyfriend was older, out of school, already immersed in the daily clutter of adulthood. When I was with him, I got to be older too - to sit in the VIP section of clubs, to nod thoughtfully as he talked about his stock options, to dress up in saris and go with him to temple like a Good Indian Girl. He had no interest in meeting my friends or hanging out with us at Cafe Campus, and over time, it became easy to completely separate who I was with him from who I was in "real life." I liked having a boyfriend to talk about, and with no evidence to the contrary, I could portray our relationship exactly as I wanted it to be. It was a bit like acting in a play about two grownups falling in love. It never occurred to me that he might have thought we were more than that; that for him, it had been real life all along.

He didn't ask me to marry him. There was no ring, no proposal. After returning from dinner one night, he simply made a casual suggestion about where our engagement party should be held. My relationship world and my real world were suddenly on an imminent collision course and I panicked.

"What if I don't want to get married?"

He looked at me the way an exasperated parent looks at a petulant child. "You will," he said.

*You don't even know me, don't know about the girls I've kissed, the smoke I've inhaled, I wanted to tell him. This character I have been playing for almost two years is not who I really am.* "I can't," I said. "I can't marry you." He fought me on it. He had a lot of very reasonable things to say. Eventually, I had to tell him the truth. I took a deep breath and said, "I don't love you." In my mind, this was a devastating bomb, a dead end from which there could be nowhere else to go and nothing else to say.

"So?"

Being in love, it seemed, had not been a factor in his plans to marry me after all. To him, I was the practical choice, a 2-year investment with ready returns. My friends consoled me on my breakup and I went through the motions of a broken heart, secretly hoping that my pajamas-wearing, ice cream-eating pantomime of sadness could convince me and them both; that my tears and torn up photographs might make of our relationship something that had been real.

"He wasn't the right one," my friends said, with the sage wisdom and certainty of being twenty-three. "You'll know when you find it."

"Find what?" I asked, already done with Montreal and the person I had become there, the kind of person who looked in the mirror and saw a liar reflected back.

“That thing that when you find it, you just know. That *spark*.”

So, I moved to Toronto, ready to become someone new, someone better. I was so sure then that I could find it if I tried, could make it, could be it, that thing, that spark. The city was full of lights and friends and music and I wandered it aimlessly; a match on a dance floor, waiting to be struck.

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When I arrived for my first shift at the Elite Network, I wasn't invited into that elegant front room, but rather directed to the back entrance leading to a dingy basement lined with cheap tables wobbling under fluorescent lights.

“This is where the magic happens!” my friend of a friend said. I looked around at the windowless space, the numbers scrawled on whiteboards, the stacks of profiles with photographs of clients smiling in the chair across from Susan's desk, some slightly skeptical, some slightly stunned. It seemed more like a place where magic came to die.

My job was to search the database and come up with as many potential matches for the clients on my list as I could. Then, I had to get on the phone and get both sides of a match to agree to meet. This process took all manner of embellishment, all of us in that basement spinning our stories, saying anything and everything to sell a client on the promise of a spark. The matchmaking team, at the time I was there, was all women. We were smart, chatty, and persuasive. We were good listeners. We were also realists who knew very well that despite the extravagant promises that Susan had made to every one of the lonely people we cajoled each night, we couldn't manufacture love. All we could do was keep rubbing the sticks we were given together, again and again, in different combinations, and hope like hell that somewhere within all the smoke we created, there might be an actual flame.

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I ran into my ex-fiancé at a wedding a few years later. He was there with his new fiancé and I was there alone, sparkling from every angle, from the bejeweled bindi on my forehead to the glittering shoes on my feet, ready to catch someone's eye with a word, with a glance, ready to ignite. My body was fatter than when he had last been inside it, my skin a shade darker, my hair less sleek. I stood behind him at the bar, smiling so hard as I touched his shoulder. He turned around, drink in hand, processed my face with cool recognition. He looked me over the way one looks at musty, mismatched clothes at a garage sale. A little curiosity, a little disdain, a little disgust.

"You used to be so hot," he said, and walked away.

*At least that makes one of us!*

I wish I had said that. The truth is, I only thought of that line much later, alone in my bed, still stewing, still stung. In the moment, I just stood there, as people jostled around me, lining up for the bar. I had been punctured, and I deflated in sparkling silence, my smile gone brittle, there only to keep my face from falling apart.

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"Are you married?" one Elite Network client asked me, as if possessing the thing that she wanted would make me better able to produce it for her out of thin air. Diane or Leslie or whatever her name was, sounded like she had been crying. This was not uncommon.

"I've been engaged," I replied, which was at least a little bit true.

"Then you know," she said. "You know what it's like to find that spark."

I didn't know. I wanted to tell Elaine/Carol/Beth that I didn't know anymore if the spark was even a real thing that existed outside of books and movies, outside of our collective heads. I

wanted to tell her she was wasting her time waiting for the Elite Network to call with a spark in an expensive suit. But none of that was in the matchmaker script. Instead, I said, “I hear you, Melanie. And I can promise you, you are the *highest* priority for our team right now. Susan has a lot of new clients coming down the pipeline and we want to make sure we’re only matching you with the *top tier* of our database.”

Patience, Gail.

It’s not you, Angela.

But it’s not us either. Honestly, we don’t even know what the *it* is.

“We’re just lying to them,” I said to my colleague one day, frustrated with the heap of damp kindling we kept lighting that was never going to burn.

She shrugged. “We’re not liars. We’re matchmakers. There’s a difference.”

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I am now the age that many of my Elite Network clients were when I first pursued the spark for them, whatever it is, whatever it means. I got a real job and married a good man. But I still think about those women crying on the phone, saying over and over about match after match, “There was just no spark!”

Would they know it if they found it?

Would I?

Would you?

I send a picture of my breasts to a stranger on the Internet. He responds with a picture of his penis. *Look how hard you make me.* Disjointed body parts, sightless and still. Virtual sparks sputtering on a screen.

I write erotic stories and publish them under false names; pages of perfect bodies colliding in passion and improbable positions. The words glow hot, fictional sparks flying between interesting people who do not exist. I'm not a liar. I'm a writer. There's a difference.

I touch my husband, who is often exhausted, whose voice carries safety and is void of disdain or disgust, but also of curiosity. My husband who neither asks for more, nor has more to offer me, whose mouth is warm when he presses it to the tattoo between my shoulder blades, blowing embers down my spine.

I watch my children tumble in the snow, their mittened hands waving, punctuation marks for shrieks of glee. "Come outside, mama!" my four-year-old cries and I do. "Look!" she says, all pink cheeks and wide eyes. Is this where the magic happens? I follow her gaze toward the sky and we catch snowflakes together; fresh, bright sparks falling all around.