

# DO YOU WANT TO BE IN MY GANG?

IN OUR INTERNET-OBSSESSED AGE, IT HAS BECOME HARDER TO  
MAKE FRIENDS IN REAL LIFE. **FLEUR BRITTEN** MEETS THOSE PIONEERING  
WAYS TO BREAK THROUGH THE BRITISH RESERVE

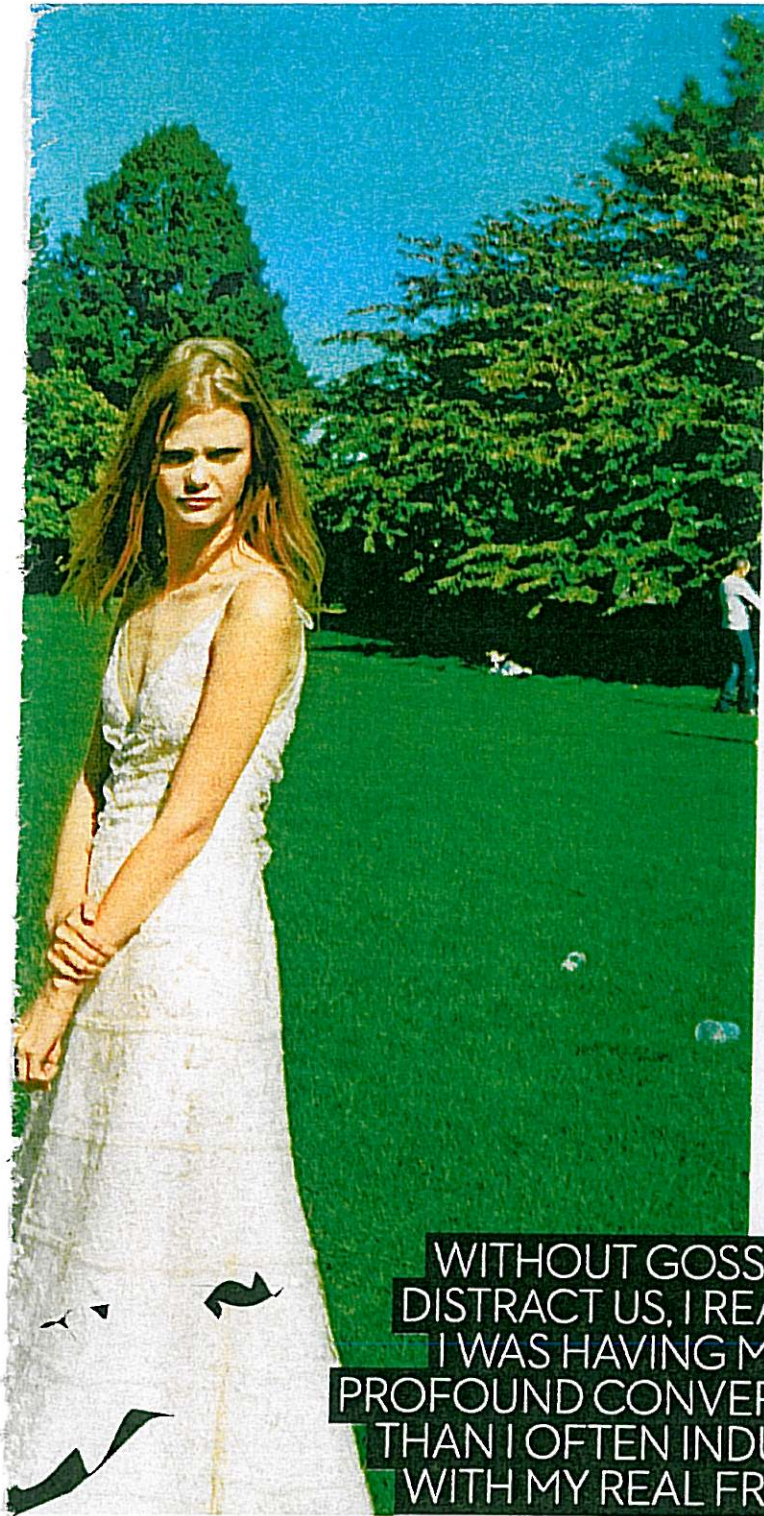
**W**hat do you know about love?" Woah — that's pretty fresh coming from a total random. But it's exactly what hundreds of strangers asked each other last Sunday at the Feast of Strangers in Hyde Park, London. Cancel those thoughts of a ragbag of no-mates. This was a young, up-for-it bunch of social explorers, ready for something — and someone — new. Some even turned up alone — after all, there wasn't much point in arriving with friends because they were soon separated and paired off with, say, the fascinating Iranian girl, a guy who'd recently moved to London, and, er, me. We were then equipped with a menu of conversational starters (for example: "What are the limits of your compassion?") — questions cleverly designed to move chat beyond the snap judgments of "What do you do, where do you live?" to universal themes that everyone has an opinion on. As a happy hum rose from the throng, it was evident that British reserve had been temporarily suspended.

"The great characteristic of our time is social isolation," says the Feast's creator, the wizard-like philosopher Theodore Zeldin, who is also the author of *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life*. "We only know people in the same situations as ourselves — we are isolated by our professions and our education. That is totally different from the village community where

everybody used to know everybody. We need new forms to deal with this." Indeed — back in 2000, Robert D Putnam's seminal book *Bowling Alone* lamented the deleterious effects of America's gradual drop in face-to-face communication, as a result of the "individualising" of entertainment (ie, television and the internet). As life has become increasingly played out online, our social lives have only suffered. Who hasn't scrolled through their mobile wondering where all the friends went?

In response to this social atomisation, a new movement encouraging real-life interaction with strangers is under way. In Brighton, Open House Dining takes place throughout September; it's modelled on Channel 4's *Come Dine with Me*, though less "vitriolic", says its director, Sam Harrington-Lowe. Twenty amateur chefs will prepare three-course meals in their own homes for four to six diners thrown together for one night. "The food is secondary," Harrington-Lowe explains. "It's more for people who want to broaden their social groups. Dinner is convivial, and you can't avoid people." Ten per cent of tickets were bought by people flying solo. "It's like a social one-night stand," says a previous Open House diner. "It's liberating to be outside your usual circle. You can discover new things instead of enduring the same old stories."

Meanwhile, Alain de Botton's School of Life hosts monthly Conversation Dinners in popular London restaurants. The point? Simply to encourage



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meaningful dialogue with people beyond the same old social tracks. Each evening is attended by some 30 to 40 professionals in their twenties, thirties and forties, and is based on Zeldin's conversational menus. Without gossip to distract us, I realise at one such dinner that I was having more profound conversations than I often indulge in with my real friends. Since the personal nature of the menu requires honesty and the casting aside of one's social "mask" — so goes Zeldin's theory — the potential for friendship is established. It also makes for a great team-building exercise, apparently — Zeldin has hosted his feasts for the World Economic Forum, Nike, the British Council and Ikea. "I can't see what there is to be embarrassed about," says Georgina, 40, a marketing professional I bond with over a discussion on family dynamics. "I am adventurous and all my friends have settled down with kids. What have I got to lose?" It's Facebook that Georgina finds tragic: "What is wrong with picking up the phone and going for a coffee? I want more good old-fashioned face-to-face time." That she is single is not irrelevant. "Of course, you're not going to meet anyone if you're home alone every night."

The internet, at the same time, is a big enabler of real-life friendships. Like internet dating, there is also friend-dating. CitySocialising ([citysocialising.com](http://citysocialising.com)) has some 100,000 potential friends across 50 British cities and towns, and unlike online dating, needn't involve buttock-clenching one-on-one

# BREAKING THE ICE

- **Manage expectations** Prepare for rejection — randos who approach strangers can be mistaken for the psychiatrically questionable. Besides, not everyone will be having a good day.
- **Test the water** Asking the time will instantly reveal whether a person is up for chatting. Gauge for friendly eyes, a prolonged gaze or a smile. Other time-honoured gambits include (obviously) the weather and flattery — about something unique to them (clothes, for example).
- **Work the situation** If on a train, comment on the destination; if at an art gallery, use the cues ("Wow, that's an amazing painting"). Then ask what they like about it — open-ended questions are more effective than those requiring yes/no responses. If in a bar, tables are antisocial, whereas everyone standing is fair game; sports bars deliver camaraderie. Queues are great for bonding over the frustration.
- **How to fill awkward silences** Chat about them. Ask questions and then listen — what do they like doing? What music/food/sports do they like? Also, swot up on current affairs for a neutral common ground.
- **How not to sound like a freak** Just be friendly and funny. And don't try too hard.

**Scott Rosenbaum, founder of RentAFriend.com**

dates. There are ready-made gangs up for, say, watching *Twilight* films, visiting art galleries, going out on the razz or just chatting. I settle for drinks at London Bridge, but perhaps it pays to choose something less generalised — the hunger in my new friends' eyes induces acute claustrophobia. "It is surprising to see guys here who'd have no problem making friends outside," admits Dino, our 35-year-old host (CitySocialising always sends a volunteer host for all introductory gatherings). He reckons that 95% turn up alone (and are mostly single). Most join "CS" after a failed relationship, or when their friends have settled down or moved away. One girl confesses that her starting

point was Googling "finding friends". Dino's motive, however, is to meet what he calls single-serving friends. "It's a Fight Club expression," he explains. "They're people that you meet randomly, and once only, and have a brilliant time with. You won't see them again, but it's not a waste — you get to explore other sides of your personality." Finding friends online becomes truly tragic when you start paying for it. RentAFriend.com might sound like a bad joke, but last month the British version launched, and there are now 15,000 Brits online offering to befriend you, for a fee of up to £15 an hour. Some 400 lonely

souls have paid up for company to, say, sporting events, to the pub, to whatever you pay them for, but not for sex — these websites are quick to point out that they're strictly platonic.

Perhaps, ultimately, the price is worth it. Strangers, it turns out, are good for us, argues Melinda Blau, co-author of *Consequential Strangers: Turning Everyday Encounters into Life-Changing Moments* (out in paperback on Friday). Studies show that time spent with strangers sharpens our minds because, Blau explains, "We don't listen to those close to us — we're much more civil and attentive to strangers." It's also known that people with community connections live on average nine years longer; social isolation is apparently as bad for you as smoking. "A new person might be easier to talk to in a crisis because they're more objective," Blau says. "They can also bolster your network, and may know someone who's gone through the same thing."

Finally, then, a solution of sorts to the great British paradox: we all want to meet new people (isn't it, after all, a goal of every festival and party?), and yet, unaided, we are so very rubbish at it. Hello, strangers. ●

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