

# Finding Monsieur Right

Muriel Zagha

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Extract

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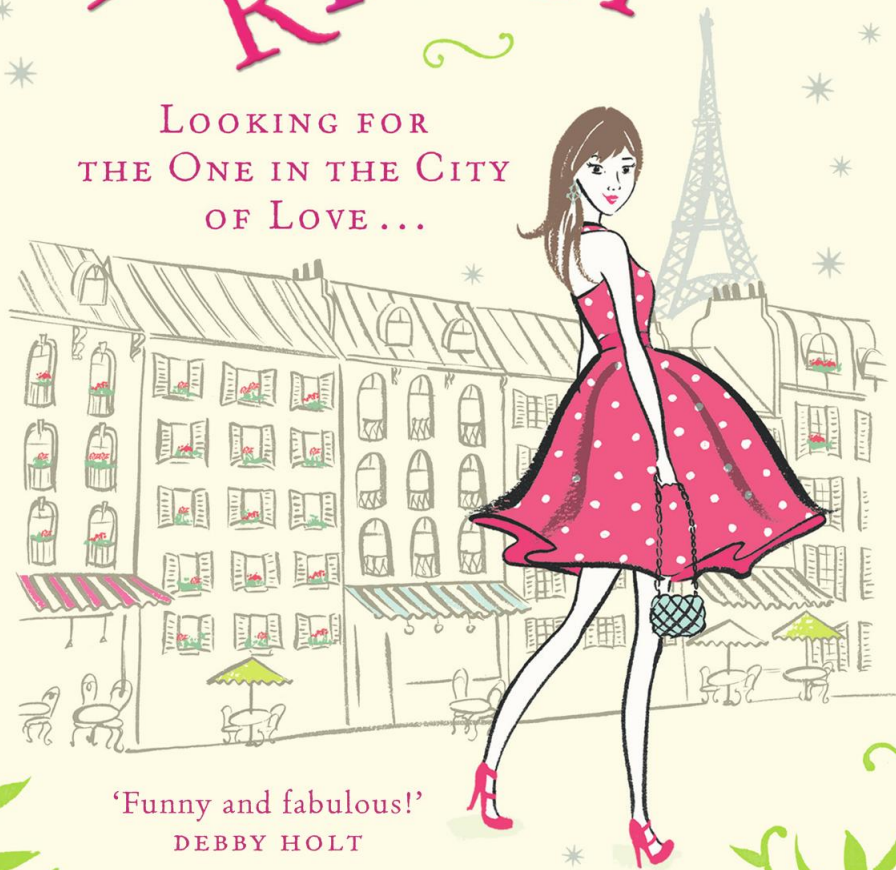
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Muriel Zagha

# FINDING MONSIEUR RIGHT

LOOKING FOR  
THE ONE IN THE CITY  
OF LOVE...



'Funny and fabulous!'

DEBBY HOLT

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# 1 Isabelle

The closest Isabelle and Daisy had come to meeting was in the initial correspondence they'd exchanged to agree the terms of their house swap.

FLAT EXCHANGE. Serious, reliable French girl looking to exchange flat in Paris Left Bank against similar accommodation (preferably quiet) in London for one year, starting early July. Contact [isabelle.papillon@lenet.fr](mailto:isabelle.papillon@lenet.fr)

**From: dizzydaze@interweb.com**

**To: isabelle.papillon@lenet.fr**

*Salut Isabelle!*

*Je suis une fille anglaise avec un grand maison à Londres. Et je voudrais tellement échanger avec toi! Cela serait fantastique! Je partage avec mes deux 'housemates' (ils louent une partie du maison), Chrissie et Jules, ils sont très sympa. Il y a un grand jardin. Là où j'habite, c'est comme une petite village dans Londres, très mignonne. Moi, j'adore Paris, c'est mon rêve depuis toujours de vivre là. Certainement tu vas avoir beaucoup d'applications mais s'il te plaît, il faut me choisir! Tu ne regretteras pas!!*

*Lots of love,*

*Daisy xxxxxxxx*

After Isabelle had replied in slightly more formal English – ‘Dear Miss Keen,’ ‘Yours faithfully’ – and explained that she was an academic and would be doing some research in London, further emailing revealed that Daisy worked in fashion. That would explain the loud pink background and curlicued font of her emails, both highly incorrect in Isabelle’s opinion. She preferred the neat legibility of Palatino font and plain black and white in what was, after all, business correspondence. *Enfin*, Daisy wasn’t French and Isabelle should make allowances for that.

While she was still making her mind up, as they lay in bed in his flat one Sunday morning, Isabelle’s boyfriend Clothaire suggested that she might prefer to swap with an academic like herself.

‘If this girl works in fashion, chances are she’s a weirdo or a bimbo,’ he said, stroking her hair while looking through *Le Monde Diplomatique*. ‘She won’t be anything like you. Doesn’t that worry you?’

In truth Clothaire had never been particularly keen on Isabelle’s scheme and had done his best to discourage her. London was fine for a weekend but why stay longer? Her boyfriend, Isabelle reflected affectionately, was a creature of habit. Away from the Saint-Germain-des-Prés bookshops where he liked to browse, his favourite walks in the Luxembourg Gardens, the cinemas of Montparnasse and the café where he had his lunch (*salade landaise* and a glass of Brouilly) every day between lectures, he would probably start gasping like a fish out of water.

‘But I won’t have to live *with* her,’ Isabelle objected in

her precise, flutelike tone. ‘In fact I have no reason ever to meet her. It’s a business arrangement.’

Looking slightly cross, Clothaire put down his paper and picked up his bowl of *café au lait* from their breakfast tray.

‘So, you’re really going to do it?’

‘It’s important for my research, you know that. I need to consult the English-language sources properly. And I think I should go now, before we get married and have children. I probably won’t get the chance again after that.’

This was not actually Isabelle’s own thinking on the question, but a version of what Agathe had said. Agathe was her best friend and she always advised Isabelle on important decisions. Agathe liked Clothaire – she had, in fact, introduced him to Isabelle four years ago. Isabelle was pretty lucky to have netted such a catch, Agathe often said, to tease her. On the other hand she had consistently encouraged Isabelle to go to London. It would be good for Clothaire to miss her a little, Agathe said. And he could so easily pop over for the weekend on the Eurostar whenever he felt like it.

Now Clothaire was sulking behind his newspaper.

‘It’s only one year,’ Isabelle said soothingly. ‘And it’s not very far away.’

‘Just don’t turn English, that’s all,’ Clothaire said huffily. Isabelle smiled at him and threw her arms around his neck. What a ridiculous idea! She was a twenty-two-year-old Parisian, not a naive little provincial. She was used to big cities. How could London possibly change her?

Three months later, in June, Isabelle looked again despairingly at her brand-new *A to Z*, then her gaze travelled up and down the rows of red-brick, gabled Edwardian houses. The deserted street looked eerie in the morning sunshine, like the setting of one of the anxiety dreams she'd always had before an exam or an important lecture. *Zut, zut et zut*, she thought irritably. This must be the right street, but the numbers stopped at 45. There was no 80 Cavendish Gardens. How could this be? Isabelle reached into her satchel, got out the clear plastic file where she kept all her travel documents and looked again at the printout of Daisy's most recent email. 'Keep going until you see a house with a yellow door. *Et voilà!*' it concluded triumphantly. Isabelle had walked up and down the street twice now, trailing her small suitcase on wheels behind her, and seen doors in almost every other colour except yellow. Although she was dressed appropriately for the time of year (dark indigo jeans, smart belt in navy leather, crisp pale-blue shirt and grey sweater loosely tied around her shoulders), she was beginning to feel hot and sweaty with irritation.

She frowned and pursed her lips. What to do? She had followed Daisy's directions with scrupulous attention. Yet things were not turning out as planned – always a source of intense frustration. London seemed to be conspiring against her. Since her arrival that morning she had travelled endlessly on the crowded and unfamiliar Underground, twice getting on the wrong branch because Daisy's instructions were not specific enough. Then there had been a very long walk from the station, right turn

after left turn after right down identical streets that went on stretching and criss-crossing like a maze. And still no yellow door. To cap it all her mobile did not work in this strange country, so she couldn't call Daisy's housemates and ask for directions. The boy called Jules was supposed to be in this morning, waiting for Isabelle in order to give her a key.

Isabelle looked down, about to reach for her suitcase, and gave a little start. There was a white cat at her feet, sniffing the grosgrain bow of her navy court shoe. Seeing the cat suddenly turn tail and strut around the corner, Isabelle instinctively took a few steps to follow her. Now what was this street called? There was no sign, nor could she make anything out in the *A to Z* about the spot where she appeared to be standing at the moment. It was a tangle of overlapping names in tiny letters. Perhaps it had been a mistake to buy a map in such a small size, but Isabelle liked to have everything compact and neat. She walked on for a bit, vaguely following the cat's stops and starts. Having started at 121, the numbers were now decreasing. The cat eventually stopped in front of a house and when Isabelle caught up with her, she saw the number 80 painted above a yellow door. It was ajar.

Could this be the right house? Isabelle rang the bell gingerly. Nothing happened. The cat had positioned herself near the opening. As Isabelle was making up her mind to ring the bell again, the door was flung wide open. A girl her own age, wearing large dark-rimmed spectacles, stood on the threshold. She was dressed in short black trousers, a black T-shirt inscribed with the word 'Rampage!' in lurid



red letters above a skull and bones and clumpy motorcycle boots. Her black hair was cut in a vaguely medieval bob, with a long fringe, and her face was very white. She seemed enormously tall.

'Excuse me,' said Isabelle, blushing a little. 'I, *heu, enfin . . .*' No, not a single word of English seemed to come. *L'horreur totale!* Her mind was a complete blank. She knew she should have gone on a refresher course before travelling.

'I see you found Raven. Well done,' said the girl without smiling. She picked up the white cat and stood cradling her, and looking at Isabelle, who had recovered some of her composure.

'Can you tell me if this is the house of Daisy Keen?'

'Well, that depends. Are you the frog?'

'I'm sorry, the fr-?'

'Frog, the frog. You know, *'allo-'allo!*'

Isabelle stared at her. The English were a curious people. She produced Daisy's email, pointing at the address on it. The girl pushed her glasses down her nose and peered at it, then turned her expressionless dark eyes on Isabelle.

'Well, what do you know. There's nothing for it, I'm afraid. You're going to have to come in.'

As Isabelle followed her inside with some hesitation, the girl said, 'The street numbers are quirky and the road kinks when you don't expect it. But you managed to find us. Clever you. I'm Jules, by the way. You must be *la belle Isabelle.*'

'Oh, you speak French?' Strictly speaking, Isabelle had

hoped to improve her English while in London but this would make things so much easier, especially on the first day.

The girl called Jules looked at her sternly through her fringe. 'I most certainly do not. What an idea!'

She looked down at Isabelle's suitcase. 'Where's the rest of your stuff?'

'This is all my luggage.'

'Really? Blimey. You could teach Daze a thing or two.' She picked up Isabelle's suitcase and led the way, clumping up the stairs in her boots.

Slowly digesting the fact that Jules was not a boy but a girl, Isabelle began to follow her up the stairs. 'Chrissie is on the ground floor,' said Jules. 'I'm on the first floor and you're at the top in Daze's quarters.' As they reached the second floor, Jules pushed open a door on the right.

'This is it. The bathroom is across the landing. All right, then.' And she clumped her way down the stairs. Raven the cat had also disappeared.

Isabelle took her first look at Daisy's bedroom and reeled backwards. There appeared to be no floor space at all inside the room. Instead there was an ankle-deep carpet of tangled clothes. And shoes: a sea of shoes in every colour of the rainbow. Over the facing wall, which was painted shocking pink, hung a great many hats and handbags. Isabelle wondered where Daisy kept her books. All she could see were hundreds of fashion magazines, piled perilously high and looking like they might tumble down at any moment. Isabelle blinked. She thought briefly of her own plain white

bedroom in Paris, with its one Matisse poster, as spare as a monk's cell.

At least this room also contained a bed, she saw with some relief. She waded across to it and sat down, making a space between piles of clothes. A pair of red high-heeled shoes lay on a pillow like the keys to the town being presented to a foreign dignitary. Oh, this was too much! How was she supposed to move into this unacceptable room?

Having washed her hands, tightened her ponytail and straightened her sweater around her shoulders, Isabelle went in search of Jules and found her in the basement kitchen, sitting at a round pine table. The room was painted pale yellow and contained a big cream-coloured fridge and an old-fashioned dresser loaded with a great deal of crockery, including several teapots in different shapes and sizes. Around the table stood several mismatched chairs. Beyond Jules was the sink (which appeared to be full of unwashed dishes, Isabelle noted disapprovingly), above which a window looked into the sunlit garden. Jules was reading a book that was propped up against a teapot, and eating a biscuit. She looked up briefly.

'All right? All moved in and everything?'

'Yes, *heu*, no. When Daisy left . . . she was late for her train?'

'What do you mean?'

'She did not have time to pack her clothes.'

'Oh no, she packed loads. Always does, can't do it any other way.'

Isabelle thought of her own precise method for packing from a list, ruthlessly eliminating everything apart from a few tried and trusted outfits plucked out of a small wardrobe in which all the items matched. She had an alarming mental image of a deranged Daisy showing armfuls of clothes into every room of her own flat, filling the bathroom with them, perhaps even the fridge . . .

‘Do you want some tea or something?’

Isabelle thanked her hostess automatically and sat down, wondering how to broach the question of the room again. She looked up as Jules pushed an enormous cup shaped like a tankard in her direction. It was adorned with a pink capital D.

‘That’s Daze’s mug. I suppose you might as well use it while you’re here.’

Rather than the delicate golden brown liquid Isabelle would have recognised as tea, the mug contained an alien-looking opaque grey-beige beverage. She sipped once, then put the thing down hurriedly.

‘Please . . .’ she said in as firm a tone as she could muster, but before she could continue there was the sound of somebody clattering down the stairs.

‘Chrissie’s home,’ Jules said. ‘Hooray.’

Isabelle turned towards the door, curious after all to see the other girl who lived in the house.

But the person who walked in was a very good-looking boy with longish straight blond hair. He was wearing a tight white T-shirt and, extremely oddly in Isabelle’s eyes, a sarong. She remembered that the British sometimes wore kilts, like Prince Charles for example, but did not know

what to make of this outlandish outfit. On Chrissie's feet were bright yellow flip-flops. He walked straight to Isabelle with both arms outstretched.

'Hi *darling!* I'm Chrissie!'

'Hello. It's nice to meet you,' Isabelle murmured politely.

But Chrissie had somehow got hold of her hands and was pulling her to her feet. For one wild moment she thought he was going to make her dance around the kitchen. Instead he clasped her in his arms for a minute, then pulled away and kissed the air on either side of her face.

'Mwah, mwah! There we are. Just like the French. Now let's have a look at you.' He stared at her for a moment and then, rather woundingly, burst out laughing. 'Oh, my goodness! Aren't you just the *sweetest* little French person! Jules, will you look at the *exquisite* way she's wearing her jaunty little *jersey!*'

Isabelle blushed to the roots of her hair. Jules kept her eyes on her book, but she smiled a little.

'Wait, wait, wait, there's *more,*' he continued, looking down at her belt. 'Is this . . . *Hermès?*'

'Erm, yes,' said Isabelle evenly. 'It was my mother's.'

Chrissie let out a high-pitched squeal. Isabelle flinched a little. He then said in a low, respectful voice: 'It's *vintage.*'

There was a short pause.

'It's just like me, I'm going for a whole Beckham story today. I *know* what you're going to say,' he said, suddenly holding up a hand an inch away from Isabelle's face. 'But the thing is you see it's *so* yesterday that it feels quite *fresh* again, positively zingy. It's *iconic.* It *works.*'

Isabelle, who did not follow football, hardly understood a word of this. He'd said something about a story. Some novel he was reading, or was planning to read?

'My *dear*, you look a bit shaken and stirred,' Chrissie said, not unkindly. 'Was darling Daze's room a bit much for you? I *try* and *try* to get her to change her ways but she just *will not* do capsule. We have an attic here, you know. I'll help you put her things in boxes and we'll store them away. She won't mind.'

'Probably won't notice they've gone,' Jules added tonelessly.

'But first, a lovely cuppa!'

Isabelle was grateful for Chrissie's offer of help and would actually have preferred him to get on with it right away. But it was very difficult to interrupt his rapid flow of speech, particularly as her English felt a bit rusty.

'You see, Daisy called me one day to say she'd bought this absolutely *vast* house and would I like to move in with her. I said, darling, it would be an *honour!* The thing is it was so *timely*, because I'd just got out of a difficult relationship. The whole Mick the Shit nightmare,' he added tersely for Jules' benefit. 'I'd been sleeping on people's floors, practically under *bridges*, for days. But now I have this *lovely* ginormous room where I sleep and entertain and next to it is my studio where I do my work. It's divine, you can see the whole garden.'

A studio . . . that meant *atelier*. That was interesting. 'Are you an artist?' asked Isabelle.

'Yes, darling, I *am*,' Chrissie replied earnestly. 'How very perceptive of you to see that.'

‘Chrissie is a milliner,’ said Jules, addressing Isabelle. Then, seeing that she still looked blank: ‘He makes hats,’ she explained.

‘Hats, tiaras, headdresses, whatever I can turn my hand to. Come into my boudoir and I’ll show you, darling, I can *tell* you’re interested. Now, let’s see . . .’

In truth Isabelle was not at all interested now she’d discovered that Chrissie busied himself, like Daisy, with such a frivolous and useless thing as fashion. What a waste of time.

‘Can you please help me with my room?’ she interjected desperately while she had the chance. ‘I would like to unpack my suitcase.’

Chrissie looked a little deflated. ‘Yes, certainly, certainly.’

Thankfully, Chrissie packed as fast as he talked and it wasn’t long before Daisy’s room was cleared out. Then he left Isabelle blissfully alone in her new domain: an extremely spacious room that could probably have contained the whole of her Paris apartment. There were three big arched windows through which she could see the garden’s tree tops against a blue sky. It was a soothing view. She decided to move Daisy’s dressing table in front of the central window. It was just the right size for her laptop and would make an ideal desk. On it she placed the framed photo of herself sitting with Clothaire and Agathe on the beach in the Ile de Ré last summer. The wardrobe now contained her carefully laundered jeans and navy trousers, a couple of straight knee-length skirts, shirts in pastel shades, three jumpers (grey, navy and camel), the understated cotton cardigan from Agnès b (grey with pretty mother-of-pearl

poppers) that was a gift from Agathe, a belted mac and a little black dress.

First thing tomorrow, she'd go to the library and get her ticket, then spend the whole day there searching the catalogue. From now on it would be work, work, work.



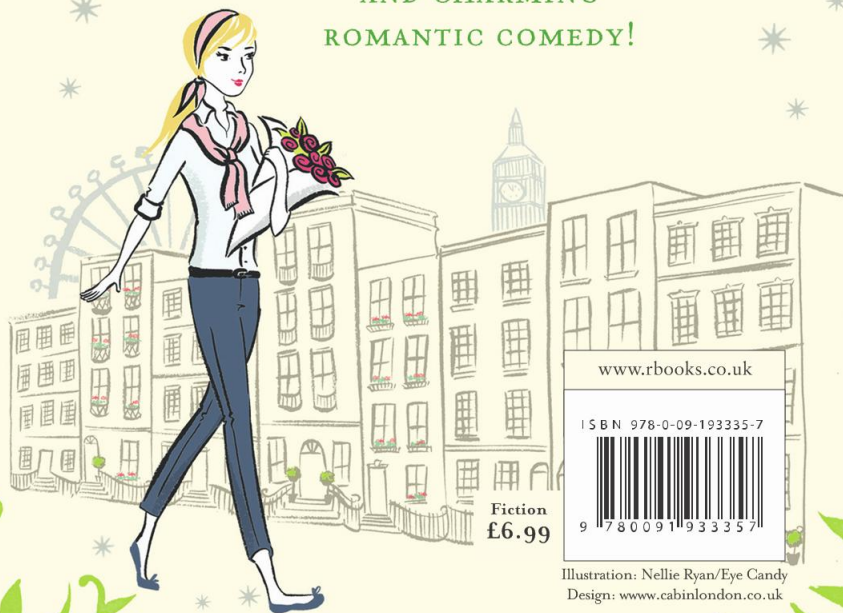
A TALE OF TWO CITIES,  
TWO GIRLS  
AND A LIFE-ALTERING SWAP...

Daisy's just landed the perfect job:  
spending a year in Paris writing about fashion.  
Swapping homes with French student Isabelle  
seems like the perfect arrangement.

Studious Isabelle, however, finds London bewildering.  
But all her assumptions about crazy English guys are  
overturned when she meets hunky gardener Tom.

Meanwhile, fun-loving Daisy discovers that Paris  
is the City of Love, and there could be more than one  
Monsieur Right...

IF YOU LIKE SOPHIE KINSELLA,  
YOU'LL LOVE MURIEL ZAGHA'S FUNNY  
AND CHARMING  
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