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## Looking For Dot♥Com Love By James Zug

It is a Thursday evening in May and I am strolling in a verdant Central Park. The birds are singing. The squirrels are playing chase. Lovers cuddle on benches or lay wrapped together on the grass under the blossoming dogwoods. Love is in the air.

Across a field I see three men in dinner jackets, a trio of penguins who have veered off-course. They ask for help. They are three men from Oracle. In the lead is Gabe Cavacchioli, the manager of the Oracle New York office. They are searching for **Cocktails with Courtney**, the fancy soirées for Silicon Alley rats run by cybergossip diva Courtney Pulitzer.

Tonight, it's the black-tie spring party at the well-appointed Central Park Boathouse — jazz band, glamour face painting, and two hundred of your closest New Economy colleagues. “We go to a lot of these parties,” Gabe says. “These black-tie events are really quite solid networking opportunities. We’ve got about twenty guys coming and, in fact, Oracle is one of the sponsors.”

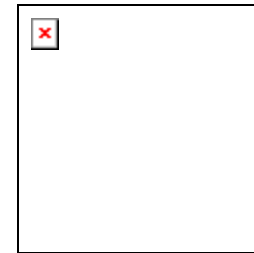
Together we find our way to the boathouse door, where we are greeted by three young women behind a table with “A-L” and “M-Z” placards and a wicker basket

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laden with guests' business cards. One woman hassles the men from Oracle, asking whether they have paid the \$150 per person fee, until Gabe leans forward and, in a kind, lowered tone, says, "We are one of the sponsors."

Beyond the ruckus at the front door stands Courtney, clad in a sequined, sand-colored dress. She tells me about the history of these parties (started in 1998; a dozen cities now) and the many business relationships that have sprung from a Cocktail with Courtney. But what about romance? Can Eros mix with e-commerce? "I don't know of any couples that started here," she says with a mournful look. "We provide the music, an elegant atmosphere, get everyone dressed up, but we don't seem to get too many love connections."

I wander into the fray. It is a black-tie party but feels more like a fraternity mixer. Fuzzy-eyed men are three-deep around the one bar, braying for rum and Cokes and 7&7s; or they are whipping out pagers to check the score of the Knicks game. "Devils, yeaaaaaaah baby," shouts one man as he high-fives a friend, happy about the team's improbable path to the Stanley Cup finals.

A fly fisherman might round out this bucolic scene and, lo, there he is on a boulder-strewn bank, clad in olive cargo pants and a fishing vest. He is casting, in good three-fourth time, his fly plopping right next to our verandah. "What are you fishing for?" someone shouts in between songs. "Bass," the fisherman says, but all we see is him hooking, repeatedly, one hungry-looking turtle.

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Next to the fish/turtleman is a gondolier named Andres. He wears a red and white striped shirt and a straw boater with a red ribbon. Three cocktailers persuade me to join them in a spin. There is Melinda, who is doing streaming video; Jens, in venture capital; and Shimmy who is running a non-profit called [angelwish.org](http://angelwish.org) and is so good-natured that he carries "hug coupons" instead of business cards.

The women are calmer, more refined, seemingly pleased to be in their backless gowns and strappy shoes, but they are not terribly pleased. Near the bar I get to chatting with a single woman in her thirties. "Isn't this a bit odd?" she says. "It's too small for a black-tie party and so many men aren't even in black-tie. The snacks are very regrettable." She picks up a vegetable chip with a dot of second-rate caviar on top. "There are things that look like pigs in a blanket. I mean, they're not, but they look exactly like them."

I ask whether she is finding any good connections, business or otherwise. "It's like the deck of the Titanic," she says, her eyes roving the dance floor "everyone is brave and forward-looking and yet there's about to be a disaster."

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“What, with the market?”

“No, with each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are more women in the Alley than in Silicon Valley, but it is still horrible here. If you’re a woman, the chance of finding a guy here is almost nil.” Five men, she says, have asked her hand in marriage. She has turned them all down, still harboring dreams of true love. The odds, she thinks, are now against her. “After thirty-two, it’s just patch, patch, patch.”

Saddened by this state of affairs, I glide out to the small verandah overlooking the pond. It is rather pleasant to stand there, the jazz band’s mellifluous tunes wafting through the French windows, the reflection of the dappled trees on the water. The refrain of “Who do you work for?” and the rustle of business cards fade out as I gaze at twilight glow.

It is a lovely ride. Andres, with a few flicks of his candy-striped paddle, moves us out onto the pond and starts singing plangent Italian love songs. Such a scene will soften even the most dedicated networker, and after a few minutes of telling each other what sort of work we do, we look up at our human engine and ask him about love. “Almost every night a couple gets engaged on the boat,” Andres says. “On the full moon I’ll get three or four.”

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“What about sex?” Jens blurts out (he’s from Europe).

“That happens a lot too. They’ll pay me a little extra and I swing the boat into some secluded corner of the pond and they’ll go at it, usually the woman on top.”

“Do you sing?”

“Well, it’s funny because you’d think that they’d want me to sing, you know, accompany their lovemaking — it would make it look like I am actually doing something besides standing on the stern watching two people have sex in a boat. But they hardly ever want me to sing. I think they want me to watch.”

Back on land, I go to the men’s room. While I am relieving myself, a man in a white jacket comes barreling through the door, clearly in his cups. “I think,” he says, as he multi-tasks a handful of business cards into his shirt pocket and unzips his fly, “I think this card was the VC guy. Shit. Was it this one?”

I wander back into the fray. The band is thumping away but hardly anyone is dancing. One couple, who turn out

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to be married, are exchanging memories of sex on a waterbed. They must have gone on the gondola.

A woman, in a simple LBD (little black dress), is complaining that she brought only twenty business cards and they are all gone. "I didn't bring any," she says to her friend. "I was in such a rush leaving, I took a shower, did my hair and makeup and got dressed, all in twenty-two minutes. I just completely forgot my cards. I knew twenty would never be enough."

The friend then asks about an ex-boyfriend and the conversation turns a bit sour. A roar comes from a herd of men peering at a pager for the Knicks score — they have just won by three. "Oh, why don't you go chug some beer and vomit in the sawdust at McSorley's," she says nastily, staring in their direction. The two women escape, unescorted, towards the verandah where the gondola and the fly fisherman and the moon are waiting in consolation. +

*James Zug is a writer living in New York.*

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