



THE CRITERIA LIST



ROWENA MABBOTT

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The Criteria List
A Single in Sydney Short Story



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*For Anne, with thanks.
The best manager a twenty-something could ask for
and shared the idea of a criteria list.*

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June 2000



'Mel?' Kate asked incredulously. 'Is that you?'

It looked like Melati, but last Kate had heard, she was travelling overseas after university and had yet to return. But perhaps she was misinformed. A little louder this time, Kate tried again, 'Melati Hidayat!'

This time, the woman turned around and smiled broadly at Kate after a flicker of concern passed across her face. 'Catherine Pieteron! What are you doing here?'

Kate grinned and stepped closer to Melati. 'I think the better question is, what are you doing here? I thought you were still overseas!'

'Well, yes, I was. But I've been back for a few months now. I'm working as a manager at the cinema in Chatswood.' Melati smiled ruefully.

Kate was stunned. Melati, Mel had completed a fine arts degree in design and was fluent in three languages: English, her native Indonesian and German. What on earth was she doing working as a manager in a cinema chain? Kate kept these thoughts to herself and smiled and nodded. 'Wow, that sounds cool. So, are you commuting from your parents' place to work up here?'

'No, that would be completely impractical!' said Melati in mock horror. 'No, my girlfriend and I have moved up here. We're renting a two-bedroom apartment on the Pacific Highway. It's a little noisy, but we're at the back of

the complex, so it's not too bad. And we have a nice flatmate from my work, Nathan. He's a sweet guy and helps cover the rent.'

Melati kept surprising Kate. She had a girlfriend? When had that happened? Mel had been dating boys the last time Kate had seen her. And living out of home already was impressive, especially after a stint travelling.

'I'd love to catch up with you properly,' Kate gushed. 'Maybe even meet your girlfriend? Would you both like to come to dinner at my place? I live here in Chatswood now, too, with my brother, Alex. Do you remember Alex? You met him at my twenty-first party?'

Melati smiled warmly, 'Of course, I remember Alex! I will never forget your twenty-first! It was such a great night, and I loved the dress-up theme. It was, and probably will always be, the only time I could dress up as Snow White!' She laughed and waved her hand over her milk chocolate-toned skin. 'Do you still see the others from university? Jacques, Scott, Ben and the rest?'

'Oh, Mel! I have so much to catch you up on. Seriously, let's do dinner sometime soon. Let me give you my home number and my mobile number. Do you have a home number for your place?' asked Kate

'No home number, just a mobile,' confirmed Melati, and they exchanged phone numbers.

After agreeing to stay in touch and attempt to catch up soon, Kate gave Melati a quick hug. As they embraced, it felt familiar but different. Melati had rounded out a little since Kate had last seen her. A softer, more feminine form had replaced the angular young woman of two years ago.

Separating, they headed off in opposite directions with a wave and smile.

* * *

Kate was delighted to receive a text invitation to dinner at Melati's new place. The invitation was for a casual dinner after work on Wednesday. Kate happily accepted once she confirmed with Alex that he would be fine to dine solo or invite a mate around.

On her way home on Wednesday, Kate purchased an expensive bouquet of beautiful native blooms. It was full of sculptural blue-grey eucalypt leaves,

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deep red proteas and some other foliage that Kate didn't know the name of. But it didn't matter, as the bouquet was striking and impressive.

Kate went home before attending the dinner, giving her time to check on Alex and get changed. She'd thought of walking to Melati's house for dinner, but after checking the Gregory's Street directory, it was too far to walk safely after dinner.

She swapped her suit for comfortable jeans, a black roll-neck jumper, and her favourite black ankle boots. Kate nodded and smiled when she checked her reflection in the full-length mirror behind her bedroom door. That would do. She was comfortable in her smart casual outfit and felt stylish. Having not seen Melati properly for a couple of years and meeting her new girlfriend, nervous excitement swelled in her gut. To see each other properly after so many years and to meet Mel's girlfriend felt like a big deal.

Kate couldn't pinpoint exactly why this felt like such a momentous event and decided it was because she missed her friend. She wasn't sure what had contributed to them losing touch. During university, they were great friends; she missed their closeness. They'd met and rapidly formed a deep friendship at the same orientation camp where she and Jacques had gotten together. Kate and Mel had each returned from a gap year spent abroad, Kate in the UK and Mel in Germany, and had bonded over their shared experiences of returning to Sydney, feeling discombobulated and like outsiders in their hometown. Whilst their individual overseas experiences were quite different, returning to study at university a year older than most other first-years were shared. Kate would love to reconnect and have Mel in her life again.

Driving past Melati's place, Kate realised there was no entrance to the complex from the Pacific Highway. And she hadn't thought to ask Mel if there was visitor parking. Feeling frustrated, she turned into the next side street. Clicking on the interior light in the car, Kate pulled out the street directory again to see if she could identify an entrance to the complex. Pouring over the page proved futile. Sighing, she closed the book and tucked it into the pocket on the back of the passenger seat.

Kate had wanted to turn up at the door with her enormous bouquet and no drama, but she'd need to call and ask for directions. Tugging her mobile

phone from her handbag, she dialled Melati's number.

Fortunately, the directions to the visitor parking were relatively straightforward, and within minutes, Kate knocked on the apartment door.

The door swung open, and there was Mel, glowing with good health. She looked radiant! She greeted Kate warmly with an all-encompassing embrace. Kate returned the hug with just as much enthusiasm.

'Come in, come in! It is so good to see you! Welcome to our home!' Mel gestured for Kate to enter.

'Thank you, and these are for you,' said Kate as she passed Mel the enormous bunch of native flowers.

'Oh wow! They're gorgeous, thank you so much!' Mel said, stepping out of the way to allow Kate into the apartment. 'I hope we have a vase big enough for these! They are stunning - so sculptural, like an artwork,' Mel enthused.

A surge of happiness rose in Kate's chest. Mel had reacted to the carefully selected bouquet just as she'd hoped.

Upon entering, Kate was surprised to see how small the space was. She didn't know why, but she'd imagined a larger apartment. The front door opened directly into a small lounge area with a compact kitchen to the right. The kitchen had an island with three barstools neatly tucked under the overhang. To the left of the kitchen, immediately behind the lounge, there was just enough space for a round dining table and four chairs. A short corridor housing the two bedrooms and a bathroom was on the other side of the room. The space was cosy, with bright paintings leaning against the walls painted in every landlord's favourite, beige.

Mel introduced her girlfriend, Robbie, and their flatmate, Nathan. After exchanging the necessary introductions and pleasantries, Mel busied herself in the kitchen preparing dinner, and Robbie helped. Kate offered to help, too, but Mel was insistent. 'No, no! You're our guest.' Mel gestured to the barstools nestled under the kitchen bench, 'Please sit at the bench. You can chat with us while we prep.'

As instructed, Kate pulled out a barstool and sat down. Feeling unsure where to start the conversation because so much time had passed since they last saw each other, Kate decided to open with some questions.

‘So, how did you two meet?’ Kate directed the question to Mel and Robbie. However, Nathan, possibly sensing an opportunity for a bit of mischief, grinned cheekily at Kate and said, ‘Oh, Mel and I work together! We met there. She’s my boss.’

‘Wow, that’s fantastic. It’s a bonus to have found a boss you can also live with! That’s rare indeed!’ Kate was gratified to see Nathan do a double-take at her quick response. She grinned.

Mel laughed. ‘I should’ve warned you, Nathan. Kate is fast! You can’t pull one over on her. But you get points for trying.’

To Kate, Mel said, ‘Actually, I met Robbie at work too! But not at the cinema. We were working at a design studio. In my final year of uni, I was working part-time—’

‘—and I was a contractor, brought in to help with a specific project.’ Robbie finished.

Mel continued, ‘We’d been working on the same project but never met each other. Until, one day, we were both in the office at the same time.’ She looked lovingly at Robbie, ‘And as they say, it was love at first sight.’

Robbie shook her head, smiling. ‘No, it bloody well wasn’t! I thought you were cute, but there was no way I was getting involved with an employee where I was getting paid. Work relationships are a bad idea.’ She shook her head again. ‘Besides, you didn’t know I was gay, and I certainly didn’t know if you were.’

Nathan piped up, ‘Kate, you will never get a clear answer. Believe me, I’ve tried! Suffice it to say, these two finally worked it out and have been happily entwined ever since.’ He glanced at Mel for confirmation, ‘I think, two years now?’

‘Almost! In a couple of months, we’ll have our second anniversary!’ Mel smiled and hip-bumped Robbie, standing beside her at the kitchen bench.

Kate felt a momentary pang of sadness that Mel had found someone like Robbie, and she hadn’t known about it. Parking those feelings to deal with later, she asked some additional questions about work and enquired about Mel’s parents and sister.

‘Oh my gosh, I haven’t told you. Aminah is in New York! She’s there with

the UN. She's part of UN Youth Australia.'

'Wow! That is phenomenal! She was always one smart cookie, and I am thrilled she is doing well.' Kate beamed with genuine delight. Aminah, Melati's younger sister, was the sweetest teenager Kate had ever met, a gorgeous girl, physically and emotionally. Kate met Aminah when she was sixteen and in her first few months of year eleven at high school. But Aminah had a superpower; she was brilliant at languages, even more so than Mel. And incredibly smart. She was top in all her subjects and was already on track for scholarships to some of the best universities in Australia. She was also courting invitations from universities in England and the USA.

When she and Mel would hang out, Aminah would loiter in the background, desperate to join in but far too polite, or perhaps shy, to do so.

'Seriously, wow. I am not surprised but am thrilled for Aminah and all of you. Your parents must be incredibly proud. How are they doing, by the way?' asked Kate.

'They're both doing well. Mum is still working at the hospital, and Dad is entering semi-retirement. There is a term for it. I can't remember—'

'—Glide to retirement,' said Kate helpfully.

Mel grinned, 'Yes, that's it! Glide to retirement. That's what he's doing now. I'm not sure what it means, but he's happy.'

Kate said, deciding to show off some of her HR knowledge, 'Glide to retirement just means easing up on some work commitments, so it is a smoother transition when people retire. Particularly for older workers, like your Dad, it is an ideal way to ease into a more relaxed lifestyle whilst not losing the connections and purpose that come with paid employment.'

Mel, Robbie, and Nathan all looked at Kate, shocked. Robbie was the first to recover, 'Okay, cool. You seem to know your stuff. What is it you do?'

Kate was a little embarrassed. She hadn't meant to sound so corporate. 'Oh, I work in HR for a large telco.'

Mel smacked her hand on the bench, 'That's right, I remember now! Sorry, I'd forgotten, and when Robbie asked me before you arrived, I had no idea. I knew it was something corporate, but I didn't know exactly what. But HR makes so much sense!' She chuckled to herself. 'You always were a genius at

that people stuff!

Kate smiled ruefully. If only Mel knew. People were often the last thing HR dealt with. Primarily, she dealt with processes, policies and problems. Not people. She smiled gracefully and accepted their comments.

'So,' said Mel, 'you're all caught up with my news. Now it's your turn. What's been happening in your life?'

Kate wondered where to begin. So much had happened since she last saw Mel nearly two years ago.

After Kate shared news of her parents' relocation to London and her and Alex's new residence in Chatswood, she recounted her breakup with Jacques to Mel, Robbie, and Nathan. When she'd finished her tale, Kate leaned back in her chair, reflecting on Jacques' crazy proposal to move in together.

'Wow! Seriously. Just wow,' said Mel. 'What was he thinking? Mind you, what were you thinking, being with him? I'm surprised you guys lasted so long.'

Kate felt a bit miffed at Mel's comment. She and Jacques had cared about each other and still did. Granted, they weren't perfect on paper, but they made it work. Kate was surprised to find herself feeling defensive. She slowly exhaled, trying to calm herself down. She didn't want to say something to Mel and risk losing their friendship again. Instead, Kate said, 'Yeah, I guess there were times when we didn't make much sense as a couple. But other times we had fun together. We're apart now, but still friends. We don't see each other often, but Jacques likes to stay in touch.'

This piqued Robbie's interest. 'Really? You're still friends? That's not awkward?'

Kate laughed. 'Probably! His idea, not mine. But so far, so good.'

Glancing at Mel, Kate suddenly felt nervous. Mel had her thinking face on. The one Kate was all too familiar with from their university days. That face suggested Mel's mind was whirring with all sorts of machinations. Kate was apprehensive. In the past, that face invariably resulted in them getting into mischief.

'So I've decided what you need. Kate, you need a list of exactly the sort of man you'd like. A criteria list, if you will!' stated Mel, in a tone that brooked

no discussion. As Mel said this, she pushed her chair back from the table and strode a couple of paces to the kitchen, where she grabbed a blue notepad from the stash of papers and notebooks near the phone and scabbled around in a nearby drawer until she found a pen that worked.

‘Let’s start now,’ she said, flourishing the pen and paper. Seated again at the table, she wrote across the top of the page in large capital letters, *KATE’S CRITERIA LIST FOR A BOYFRIEND*.

Meanwhile, Robbie and Nathan had been watching the small scene play out with amused expressions. Kate assumed it was not uncommon for Mel to leap up from the table and write a list there and then. Certainly, Kate appreciated a good list. She also liked getting things done when you thought of them. So she could understand Mel moving into immediate action.

‘Right. What will be the first thing on the list?’ asked Mel rhetorically. She didn’t expect an answer, as she was already writing words on the page.

‘Mel, that’s lovely. But what are you writing? I’m not sure I even want this list!’ Kate felt she needed to interrupt Mel’s flow of writing.

‘Yeah, you do. You need this,’ Mel replied firmly. ‘No one wants to hear more sob stories from you about your hopeless love life. You need to get a decent boyfriend who is right for you. Not Jacques, and not some other random man, either. So, we’ll make a list; that way, you know what you want when you meet someone.’

Kate recalled an earlier conversation about a criteria list. She knew this wasn’t the first time writing a criteria list had been suggested to her. As she racked her brains trying to remember, Kate noticed Robbie smiling warmly at Mel, and she felt a pang. Robbie doted on Mel, and Mel returned the affection. Kate realised she *would* like to have a relationship like that.

Anne! The thought pinged in her mind like a chime. It had been Anne who first talked to her about a criteria list. Yes! It was coming back to Kate now. At the beginning of the year, Anne, their rotation manager, spoke to her and Penny about the importance of having a criteria list when considering any boyfriend, especially when considering a future long-term partner. Anne had referred to it as looking at the bigger picture, explicitly considering things like shared values, qualities, and traits of the person you could spend your

life with.

Kate felt a rush of realisation. After speaking with Anne, she'd planned to create a criteria list but, after a few days, had forgotten. It was bad timing in some ways, as over the previous weeks, Kate's whole world had felt like it was self-combusting with the break up of her family as her parents readied and then departed for London. She knew it would be good for them, but it still felt like the empty nest was the wrong way around. Her parents were heading off to explore the world, and she and her younger brother, Alex, were left in the nest. Moving from the family home and settling into their new, smaller house in a different part of Sydney was challenging. And, with her parents gone, Kate suddenly found she needed to take responsibility for caring for Alex. To top it all off, she and her on-and-off boyfriend Jacques had split up again. At the time, Kate had felt like she was zipping through her life on a moving footway. Everything was happening faster than she felt able to cope.

Anne had spoken to her and Penny after overhearing a lunchtime conversation between them about the breakup with Jacques. Anne's intentions had been good, but with everything else happening then, Kate had not given the criteria list suggestion any real thought beyond the initial conversation.

But now, nearly six months on, Anne's points resonated. If Kate had been more aware or deliberate in her choice to date Jacques, many of their challenges could have been avoided. She scoffed. Snap out of it. You were nineteen! With Jacques, it was chemistry and fun.

Shaking herself free from her recollections, Kate suspected creating a criteria list wasn't a bad idea. And with Mel so keen on the idea, Kate was warming to it.

Bringing herself back to the conversation around the dining table, Kate tried to glance at Mel's furiously written list. Not being skilled at reading upside down, it was indecipherable. She decided to ask.

'Okay, okay!' Kate said in mock resignation. 'What's on this list so far?'

Mel responded, 'Intelligent, well-read, funny—'

'—Hey, that sounds like me!' said Nathan.

Ignoring the interruption, Mel continued, 'Well-educated, similar values, interested and informed about the world. That's all I've got so far.' She paused

and then asked, 'What else should we put?'

'Rather than funny, how about 'makes Kate laugh?'' suggested Robbie.

'Oh yes, much better! I'll change it,' replied Mel gleefully.

'How about that this mythical guy fancies me?' suggested Kate with a grin.

'Oh, yes, that's a good one.' Robbie agreed. 'It's great if this guy is amazing, but if he doesn't fancy Kate—'

'—it's all a bit pointless?' finished Kate.

Mel looked hurt. 'Not pointless. Still useful! Of course, this guy is going to fancy you, Kate. You're gorgeous!' she smiled. 'But yes, I have added 'must fancy Kate' to the list. Happy now?'

'Hmm, yes. Thrilled.' Kate joked. 'Now that we're doing this let's do it properly. Please add 'kind' and 'likes animals' to the list.'

Mel beamed and wrote those items on the paper. Kate was happy to have pleased Mel and was starting to enjoy the idea of a criteria list.

Robbie and Nathan started to make suggestions, too, but not all made it onto the list.

'Tall, dark and handsome?' suggested Nathan.

Kate recalled Anne's advice to stick to qualities and values rather than appearances. Anne had said appearances changed, but qualities and values provided a stronger indication of long-term compatibility. Kate didn't want to dissuade Nathan; he was a straight male, so he was the perfect source material in some ways.

'Hmm. I like it, Nathan. And sure, tall, dark and handsome would be great! But I want to avoid specifics around appearance on the list. What about 'needs to be taller than Kate?'' suggested Kate. Nathan looked satisfied with that alternative.

Mel wrote it down, adding, 'Not that being taller than your five foot two is tough, Kate!' She smiled fondly at Kate.

'Hey! Cheeky. I'm five foot three; I'll have you know!' Kate smirked. They continued to chat and occasionally added items to the criteria list for the next hour. A lot of conversation and friendly ribbing resulted in a few more items added to the list.

Nathan cleared the table and offered to make coffee or tea. Kate gratefully

accepted a mug of tea.

Carefully sipping her steaming peppermint tea, Kate listened as Robbie and Mel discussed their desire to travel again. Kate suggested Mel could visit her parents in London, sure that Robert and Isabel would be happy to see her. As they talked about travel and the various adventures they'd each had, Kate was reminded of earlier boyfriends and some of their great qualities, as well as some of their less good traits.

Now that they were writing a list, Kate wanted to ensure it was good and remained focused on primarily positive things. But, some things had to be stated plainly.

'I'd like to add two important items to the list. The first, 'non-smoker,' and the second, 'must not like cricket.'

Robbie raised an eyebrow, and Mel looked quizzically at Kate. Kate shrugged and said, 'I remember a boy I had a crush on in high school, but he was always playing cricket! He was never available to hang out because every day of the school holidays, he was busy with cricket and the same all weekend. It was annoying. So, thinking about a possible future boyfriend, I'd prefer not to repeat that experience. Hence, must not like cricket,' she finished with a smile.

'Makes sense to me! It's added,' said Mel. 'And the non-smoker? I know why you'd add it, but is there a story there?'

'Yep, it's a standard addition, but you're right. There's a story. After I broke up with Jacques, I went on a couple of dates with a man from work who was a smoker. I didn't think it would bother me initially, but it did. We only had two dates, but that was enough for me to know I don't like kissing an ashtray!'

Robbie laughed and said, 'Here, here! Me neither.'

'Okay, done. So now that you're thinking about ex-boyfriends or people you've dated, anything else you can think of or want to add?' asked Mel.

'Yes, how about 'good table manners,' 'stable' and 'loves his family'? And what about 'committed'?'

Mel laughed good-naturedly, 'Oh my god, I've created a monster!' but she wrote each item on the paper. 'How about ambitious? You're so driven, Kate. You'd probably be unhappy with someone who wasn't at least a bit similar.'

‘Oh, okay.’ Kate paused and thought. Mel was correct, but Jacques was very ambitious, and she felt that wasn’t quite the right word for what she wanted in a potential partner. ‘I like the word you used, driven. So rather than ambitious, how about we add ‘driven’? That feels a little less aggressive.’

‘Done. Anything else?’

‘Yes, please, how about ‘prepared to take charge’ and then write ‘sometimes’ in brackets?’ said Kate. ‘The man from work, the smoker, took charge and organised the dates. And I enjoyed that. I didn’t have to organise the date, it just happened! That was rather lovely,’ Kate reflected.

‘I can see how that would be appealing!’ commented Robbie, flashing a grin at Mel.

Mel laughed and asked Kate, ‘So, why add ‘sometimes’? If it was so lovely, why not just have it on the list?’

‘Yeah, but I don’t want someone who controls everything! I want a relationship of equals.’

Nodding her understanding, Mel wrote it on the list.

After washing up the few pans that wouldn’t fit in the dishwasher, Nathan waved the tea towel at them and suggested, ‘What about house-trained!?’

Mel didn’t wait for Kate to approve; she wrote it on the list. She asked, ‘So, anything else?’

Kate paused and thought. ‘I’m not sure, what do you think? You’ve got the list in front of you.’

Mel scanned the list. Before she said anything, Kate asked, ‘Do we have a good sense of humour on there?’

‘Yes, sort of. Remember you wanted it to say ‘Makes Kate laugh,’ so that’s what we have.’ Mel waited a beat, then with a gleam in her eye and a quirk of her lips, said, ‘What about the joke test?’

Kate slowly smiled. ‘Oh! Yes! Okay. But how do we capture that?’

‘Hang on, what’s the joke test?’ asked Robbie.

Mel looked at Kate, asking with her eyes for permission to share. Kate nodded, still grinning.

‘So, when I first met Kate at uni orientation camp, within hours of introducing ourselves, Kate told me a joke,’ Mel giggled. ‘Sorry, sorry. It’s

already making me giggle.' She made a show of taking a deep breath.

'What's the joke? If you're already giggling, I want to hear it!' said Nathan, leaning on the kitchen bench. Kate glanced his way; he looked interested. She remembered with a jolt how she'd told Jacques the joke that same o-camp weekend, and he'd not liked it. He'd giggled, but she knew it'd only been for show, as after that, he never liked her telling *any* jokes, especially not that one.

'Go on, Kate, tell it,' said Mel, nodding. 'Robbie and Nathan are the perfect audience,' she winked at Kate.

'You're sure? With the voices?' asked Kate.

'Yes! You have to do the voices! It doesn't work without them,' Mel said.

'Okay. Here goes,' Kate said in her normal voice. Then, with a wave of her hand, she started speaking with an American drawl. 'Three women are talking about what they call their man. The first one says, "Well, I call my man sugar 'cos he's so sweet." The other two women coo and nod with approval. The second woman says, "I call my man honey 'cos he's sweet and smooth." They all nod in agreement again. The third woman hasn't said anything, so the first woman says, "Come on, Mary-Lou, what do you call your man?" Mary-Lou says, "Well, I call my man Midori." The second woman looks confused and says, "Midori, ain't that some fancy liquor?" and Mary Lou says, "That's my boy!"'

Mel whooped, 'I love it! So good!'

Kate smiled. She'd forgotten how much she *loved* that joke. It was her favourite for so many reasons.

Robbie was grinning, and even Nathan was smiling. Although Kate noticed he looked a little flustered and pink in the cheeks.

'So, I give you the joke test!' said Mel with a flourish of her arm, as if she'd just completed a magic trick and was waiting for applause. 'Robbie, you've passed, and Nathan,' she looked across at him, giggling, and said, 'you're a maybe!'

'Unfair! I laughed.' Nathan cleared his throat, 'It made me a little uncomfortable, but I think it's funny.' Kate thought he sounded a bit put out.

‘It’s fine, Nathan, you don’t need to like it. I think that’s Mel’s point, right?’ Kate said, looking at Mel, who nodded.

‘Yep, that’s the point. The joke is the perfect test. It checks that the man has a sense of humour and is comfortable with you, Kate, being the centre of attention. And that he’s comfortable enough in his sense of masculinity not to be threatened by the joke, and if he laughs appropriately, it’s a pretty good indicator that he’ll be a generous lover!’

‘Yep! And,’ added Kate, ‘when Mel first heard it, she laughed at all the right places. I assume you’re benefiting from that, Robbie?’

Robbie smiled, and her cheeks flushed. ‘I couldn’t say!’

‘I can, and yes, she is!’ Mel laughed and leaned across the table to kiss Robbie.

Kate smiled. ‘Okay, so now we’ve established the joke test, how do we put that on the criteria list?’

‘You know, when you told that joke, your eyes were sparkling, and your whole face lit up. For those few minutes, you were more like that girl I met back at o-camp than you have been all evening,’ Mel said.

‘Oh. Thanks, I think?’ said Kate, unsure if Mel meant that as a compliment.

‘No, it’s good! That’s why it’s a good test. So, to the list. How about we just put ‘passes the joke test?’

Robbie said, ‘It’s a pretty good criteria–’

‘–criterion,’ said Mel.

‘Sorry, criterion. Not all of us have English teachers for parents! Anyway, the joke test might be one of the most important items on your list. I’d put it above good table manners!’ Robbie smiled and winked at Kate.

‘Okay, sure. Pop it on.’

‘I already have,’ said Mel. ‘Must pass the joke test, added.’

After the dishes had all been done and were away, and Kate had finished her tea, it was time to head home. It had been a wonderful evening, and Kate felt excited at having Mel back in her life. Robbie was lovely, and Kate could see that she and Mel were a great match. Nathan had been a good sport, playing along and providing some helpful suggestions.

With her thank you and farewell said, Kate headed back to her car. A few

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hours ago, she'd arrived with an enormous bouquet. Now, she held something just as precious: her criteria list.

A few minutes later, Kate was safely home. She greeted Alex before heading to her room. Laying the paper on her desk, she added one more item; Kate fancies him.

Satisfied, she reviewed the list.

KATE'S CRITERIA LIST FOR A BOYFRIEND

Intelligent

Well-read

Good sense of humour (must pass the joke test)

Well-educated

Kind

Likes animals

Open and interested in the world

Fancies Kate

Needs to be taller than Kate

Must not like cricket

Non-smoker

Good table manners

Values family

Committed

Driven

Prepared to take charge (sometimes)

House-trained

Kate fancies him

Yes, she thought, that is a great start.

Over the next few days, as Kate thought of additional items, she would add them to the list. By the weekend, she was feeling pleased with her list. She had added 'enjoys theatre,' is 'keen to travel,' is 'open-minded,' and 'likes Kate's friends'. The last one she realised was critical, as the disconnect between their friendship groups was one of the significant challenges in her relationship

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with Jacques.

Reviewing the list, Kate was delighted. It was an excellent list! She folded the sheet of blue paper in half and then half again and tucked it into the top drawer of her desk.

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Where was it? Kate sighed with exasperation. She *knew* she had a pink ribbon in her bedroom somewhere. She'd searched her wardrobe for the last ten minutes, desperately looking for it. She was sure she'd stashed it on a shelf or maybe in a drawer after her birthday party in September. She had a vivid image of it and knew it would be perfect for wrapping around the box containing Penny's birthday gift.

She'd emptied and re-packed the small shelf at the top of her wardrobe where she stored wrapping items. It wasn't there. She did find a gift bag, though, which was helpful. But it wasn't the right size for this occasion.

Kate tried all her dresser drawers with no luck. Finally, she ripped out the desk's top drawer, tipped it upside down and dumped the contents on the floor.

Aha! There it was. A flash of pink right at the back, under the random detritus of items accumulating in every top drawer. A folded piece of blue paper caught her eye as she reached for the pink ribbon. Dusting the ribbon off, Kate put it safely to the side. She didn't want to lose it again.

Curious, she tugged the blue paper from underneath the instructions for her high school calculator, a stapler, some stray paper clips and a few random pens.

The Criteria List

Carefully, she unfolded it.

'Oh!' Kate gasped. My goodness! It was her criteria list. She'd forgotten all about writing that list. The last six months had been hectic, and the criteria list had utterly slipped her memory.

Scanning the list, Kate marvelled at how comprehensive it was. The list definitely captured the qualities and traits she would want in a boyfriend or long-term partner.

KATE'S CRITERIA LIST FOR A BOYFRIEND

Intelligent

Well-read

Good sense of humour (must pass the joke test)

Well-educated

Kind

Likes animals

Open and interested in the world

Fancies Kate

Needs to be taller than Kate

Must not like cricket

Non-smoker

Good table manners

Values family

Committed

Driven

Prepared to take charge (sometimes)

House-trained

Kate fancies him

Enjoys theatre

Keen to travel

Open-minded

Likes Kate's friends

Pausing momentarily, she considered Jacques, who she was once again dating.

They'd reunited in November after she returned from visiting her parents in London. Reviewing the list and thinking about him, Kate realised he met barely a handful of the criteria.

And then her mind wandered to Jon Williams, the fellow graduate she'd worked with over the last few weeks. She re-read the list again, considering Jon.

Yes, Jon was undoubtedly intelligent and well-read. He also had a sense of humour, though it was unclear whether it was good. His attempts at humour to date had been a bit mean. She hadn't laughed. Unclear, the jury's out on that one, Kate thought.

Kate worked her way down the list.

Jon was a fellow grad, so he was educated. Check. Did he like animals? Unclear. But, based on their conversations in the graduate meetings, she could confirm he was open to and interested in the world. Check.

Kate inhaled sharply. 'Fancies Kate'... reading those words, she felt a surge of something in her chest. She *hoped* he liked her. She wasn't sure whether he did, but Penny thought he might. Kate decided that was another item to be left unclear.

Jon was taller than her, so that was a yes. She assumed he'd like cricket as just about every male she'd ever met did, so that was probably a no. As for smoking, Kate couldn't recall him ever smoking during their outings with the graduates last year. So, non-smoker. Check.

Scanning her eyes over the following two items, she smiled. Jon valued family, as she recalled a brief conversation they had at the conference in August before her birthday. He'd called his mum to tell her he loved her. Check.

He hadn't sat with them at that same conference for dinner, so good table manners were unclear.

Kate's eyes skipped over the following criteria, immediately knowing yes, yes, yes, maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe.

Jon was a driven individual who took charge at work, but Kate was unsure if he would exhibit the same qualities outside of work. Again, she suspected he was open-minded based on a few of his comments. She knew he'd relocated

The Criteria List

from the country and shared a house with some friends, so there was a good possibility he was house-trained. And Jon likes Penny, Kate thought, which was a good indication that he might like her friends. Theatre and travel were both uncertain.

With a start, Kate realised Jon met many more criteria than Jacques. Certainly, most of the important ones. The flutter she'd felt in her chest earlier, which had been merely the hint of a breeze, was picking up speed and now felt akin to a summer southerly buster. Huh. That last one, 'Kate fancies him,' was perhaps not a maybe going by what her insides were doing.

Dismissing her excitement as nothing more than a coincidence, she put the list aside. She was with Jacques again now, and that was that. There was no point dwelling on a silly criteria list, especially not one written months ago with people she hadn't seen since.

Shaking herself from her reverie, Kate reminded herself she had more important things to get on with—specifically, Penny's birthday gift to wrap.

Picking up the list, Kate refolded it and tucked it into the top drawer of her bedside table. Now that she'd found it again and been reminded of how comprehensive it was, she might want to review it again sometime.

But maybe, if the opportunity presented itself, she'd casually tell Jon the joke and gauge his reaction. She smiled to herself.

For now, though, her criteria list could wait.



About the Author



Rowena Mabbott writes contemporary fiction and monthly articles for her career and life coaching business. When she is not wrangling her teen boys or walking the dog, Rowena enjoys reading, singing, and spending time with her husband.

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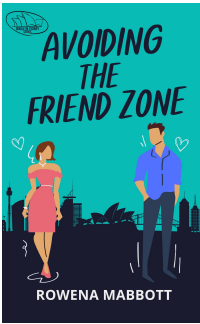
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Have you enjoyed this? Check out the first book in the Single in Sydney Series, **Avoiding The Friend Zone**, to read more about Kate and her colleague Jon Williams.



Avoiding the Friend Zone

Two ambitious graduates, Jon and Kate, navigate their careers and an emerging romance in the bustling city of Sydney in a story that will have you cheering them until the very end.

*Avoiding The Friend Zone is a sweet workplace love story with a HEA (happily ever after). It's the first book in the interconnected **Single in Sydney** series and can be read as a*

stand alone story.