

GREEN GODDESS

'FOR ME, LOVE IS FIXING THE TAP OR DOING THE WASHING UP WITHOUT BEING ASKED'

LOUISA PEARSON

LIFESTYLE

MY DAD'S name is Valentine. And no, before you ask, my dad isn't Val Doonican. Although he does own a number of V-neck sweaters. It's that time of year again. The week when teenagers look even more anxious than usual while wondering if a card will drop through the letterbox. Wives everywhere are ringing up florists to send themselves bouquets. They're getting them delivered to work because the real point of Valentine's Day is not to express your love to the one you love but rather to show the rest of the world just how loved you are. At least that's my understanding of it. Not that I'm against romantic gestures per se. But for me, love is fixing the leaky tap or doing the washing up without being asked. This is what marriage does to you: lowers your romantic expectations and inclinations beyond all imagining. They don't tell you that before the ring goes on your finger.

But let's just play along with this Valentine's thing for a little while. Can we successfully go through the motions with the environment in mind? Almost a billion cards are sent each year, but how many of those are recycled no-one knows. Some green types will recommend that you send an E-Valentine. These people are men who've forgotten to buy a card and who are now scabbling around for excuses. If you really want to do the right thing, buy a card that has been hand-made by some local artisan and frame it afterwards.

Next, flowers. My dream of a Britain where everyone buys locally grown cut flowers has hit a reality check. You've seen the weather out there - do you think there are many flowers in full bloom in February? Yes, clever gardeners could create a home-made bouquet of seasonal greenery but otherwise you're going to have to head south to Cornwall, the Scilly Isles and so on. For British-grown posies, try www.wigglywiggles.com or www.cornishcountryflowers.co.uk. If you're running short on time, visit www.fairtrade.org.uk to find out which supermarkets stock fairly traded blooms grown overseas.

The local angle also applies to English sparkling wine. You may be sceptical, but English wineries such as Nyetimber, Ridge View and Breaky Bottom (yes, really) all produce award-winning fizz. Chocolates come next and you can easily get the organic versions. Even better, track down Scottish-made organic chocs - Coco of Bruntfield (www.cocochocolate.co.uk) has some very glam options.

Time to get even more romantic. As an entrenched wearer of brushed cotton pyjamas, I find the notion odd, but I've heard that some men buy lingerie for their beloved. Frilly pants are available in organic, ethical fabrics - sites such as www.luvahuva.co.uk and cielshop.co.uk have upmarket selections, but to save time you could hotfoot it to Marks & Sparks, which has carbon-neutral undies in the Autograph Autumn Leaves label.

And should you find yourself in need of 'protection', the site www.frenchlettercondoms.co.uk can provide carbon-neutral, fairly traded and FSC-certified rubber condoms. Hopeless romantics rejoice, for eco-friendly love has finally become a reality. ■

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Reach for the best

If you want a longer, leaner you, Gyrotonic could be the answer

WORDS RUTH WALKER

PHOTOGRAPH ROBERT PERRY



JOHN had been badly injured in a helicopter accident, leaving him struggling to walk and in constant pain. Every day was a hardship for this once active man. Having spent thousands of pounds on chiropractors, osteopaths and physiotherapists and endured two unsuccessful operations on his back, he was growing increasingly frustrated when he eventually found his way to Gyrotonic as a last resort.

"He got complete relief," says Finlay Menzies, of Glasgow's The Movement Studio. "He is able to walk unimpeded and is really bouncing now. He's almost a different person."

Morag had been a runner, regularly competing in 10k races, until she slipped a disc and developed sciatica in both legs. It left her virtually crippled, bent over like a question mark and, like John, visits to the chiropractor and physio had failed to bring any relief. Now, after a year of Gyrotonic, she is doing something she never thought would have been possible: she has started to run again.

A miracle? Not entirely, says Menzies, but some of his clients might disagree.

The brainchild of Romanian ballet dancer Juliu Horvath, Gyrotonic is a system of exercise focusing on core strength, using a machine (otherwise known as the

White Cloud) made up of a handcrafted wooden bench and a tower of pulleys, ropes and weights. It all resembles some kind of medieval torture implement rather than an instrument of healing. But, combining elements of swimming, yoga, tai chi, dance and pilates, it can provide relief for those with persistent, chronic back pain as well as other muscular skeletal problems such as frozen shoulder, sciatica and lumbago. It's also beneficial for those who have suffered a hernia or who have shoulder, neck and other problems associated with posture. Oh, and if you just want to improve your flexibility, have better coordination or develop the body of a ballerina, it's good for you too.

A one-time pro golfer and a regular on the 'tartan tour', 41-year-old Menzies was introduced to Gyrotonic by his wife Kate, a former dancer with Scottish Ballet who had turned to the exercise herself after injury and then returned to dance stronger than ever. "I reached the stage where I just wasn't improving and I didn't understand why," he says. "Around the same time as I was reaching the end of my tether, I got an injury. Kate persuaded me to try Gyrotonic, and the effect was very powerful. It took my pain away and allowed me to go back to playing golf.

In the last couple of years I played the best golf I'd played since I was 16."

The system of pulleys

FULL STRETCH Finlay Menzies helps a client build core strength with the Gyrotonic system



and weights means the body is always supported, while the exercises concentrate on stretching, lengthening the muscles and opening up all the joints. I'm a little sceptical, but Rhona Maclean, also a former ballet dancer, takes me through my paces at the Edinburgh Body Tonic studio in a session that leaves me surprisingly energised and at the same time relaxed. Each exercise flows into the other as my stiff joints obediently crack. Maclean is hands-on, guiding me into each position, but I am still required to do the work – this is no toning table exercise.

At one stage I'm sitting on the bench, pushing round the handles in wide arcs; in another I'm lying down, feet held in mid-air by the weighted pulleys, moving my legs in controlled circles and scissors. Maclean is enormously encouraging – she says I'm a natural – and communicates throughout, and I can almost picture myself as a lithe, graceful ballerina with endless limbs and swan-like neck. Almost.

"If you can imagine taking a really good yawn – a big stretch," says Menzies. "Adults don't usually do this very often any more, but children have much more time for it. They do it instinctively. Gyrotonic is like that feeling," he says. "And the strength that's required to make a yawn – it's not just a static stretch – that's the sort of exercise you're doing."

Maclean agrees. "That's a great way

of describing it." And, indeed, at the end of the hour I feel thoroughly stretched and walking tall.

"You will feel narrower," says Menzies. "You'll feel the shape you should be. It's the feeling you would get if you were wearing a tight skirt." He adds hastily, "I'm a man, but I'm reliably told that's the feeling."

Not only will you feel stronger and more elegant, you could become slimmer as a result too. "You see people at gyms who work a lot on their abdominals on the understanding that they'll get thinner. What happens is that your abdominal muscles bunch and there's no thought given to your breathing. Very quickly with Gyrotonic you have a grace and an elegance. If you imagine a ballet dancer – they don't have that sharp, chiselled muscle you get from a gym. We're looking to lengthen the muscles."

More than that, however, he says it's about making the most of yourself; being the person you were supposed to be. "It's a well-being thing – becoming the shape and getting the posture you were designed to have." ■

The Movement Studio, 10 Claremont Terrace, Glasgow (0141-586 7199, www.themovementstudio.co.uk) – £180 for five sessions; Edinburgh Body Tonic, 15-19 York Place, Edinburgh (07810 234618, www.edinburghbodytonic.co.uk) – £400 for ten sessions

HEALTHY BITE

'SURELY A SAINT WHO HAS LOST ALL SENSE OF DECENCY CAN BE STRIPPED OF HIS SAINTHOOD'

RUTH WALKER

VALENTINE'S Day. My heart hurts already. Real, genuine, chest-clutching pain. People. Can. We. Just. Not. Do. This? I'm serious. If a dishonourable banker can be stripped of his honour, surely a saint who has lost all sense of decency can be stripped of his sainthood. I'm starting the campaign right here. Who's with me?

Flowers – they're OK. Chocolates – fair enough. Diamonds – yuh-huh! But can we stop using 14 February as a day to flog any old junk to fools so blinded by infatuation that they think, as long as it's pink or red and features one of those gormless Forever Friends bears, it can pass as a suitable gift for the object of their obsession. (As a side note, I don't include pink gin in this particular equation: that makes a perfectly good gift at any time of year. However, red marmalade does not.)

Since before Christmas, the e-mails have been dropping into my inbox, sealed with wishful thinking and fragrant with desperate anticipation. Alongside the predictable soaps, scented candles, cosmetics, his 'n' hers cookbooks, underwear, skincare and personalised jewellery suggested as potential presents is the more unexpected herbal 'love tea' ("perfect for cuddling up and relaxing at home"), lip balm (to "perfect your pout in time for a romantic Valentine's evening") and a hot chocolate bikini wax ("in high demand in the run up to Valentine's Day"). Yikes!

Then there is the His and Hers board game. "This enlightening game playfully highlights the endless differences between the sexes," the blurb goes, describing it as "a hugely entertaining, eye-opening opportunity to find out more about how the opposite sex ticks". Example questions (pink for girls, blue for boys – genius) include: What is the only body muscle that is attached at one end only? Clue: it's not what you might think. And men speak about 12,500 words a day. To the nearest thousand, how many does the average woman speak in a day? Clue: it's more.

We also loved the suggestion of flatulence-filtering underpants. As the recipient of this thoughtful Valentine's present, our loved one can "fart with confidence", as it employs the same technology used in chemical-warfare suits. My knees tremble at the very thought.

But our favourite has to be the "Valentine's saucy ski top ten", which plumbs down the slippery slope of puerile double entendre by attempting to combine the twin delights of snowsports and bedroom athletics. "When you draw breath at the end of it, you're always willing to get back on top and give it another go," it sniggers, clearly proud of its clever wordplay. "You can go at it alone, but it's much better together, or even in a

group," it continues, tittering like a pubescent schoolboy who has just discovered the word 'bra' and thinks it the most hilarious thing in the world. "When you've got children, you're lucky if you manage it more than once a year." And: "A good wax reduces friction and provides a smoother ride."

Really? I think we can all agree there's nothing very saintly about that. ■

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