

# Delivery

*Jean Flynn*

‘READ IT BACK to me,’ said Helen.

Pam cleared her throat. “Modern independent woman, late thirties, enjoys playing Scrabble, reading and socialising with friends”.’

‘Late thirties?’ Helen touched her crow’s feet. ‘Would anyone believe that?’

‘Everyone exaggerates in their profiles.’

‘Socialising with friends?’

‘Well, I’m here right now,’ said Pam. ‘We’re socialising.’

‘I don’t think sisters count,’ said Helen. ‘No offence.’

‘You’ve got friends. What about Jen?’

Helen glanced out the window and saw the postie ride straight past her letterbox. ‘She stopped coming over.’

They sat in silence for a while after that. Helen tried to remember the last time she’d had someone round. Someone other than Pam. The woman from next door had come over once, with an invitation to a Tupperware party. Helen had wanted to say yes, but panic quickly filled her body and that was that.

‘It’s pointless, you doing this,’ Helen said, walking over to the computer. ‘I can’t go on a date. I can’t go anywhere.’

‘You don’t have to,’ said Pam. ‘They can come here.’

Helen frowned.

‘It might be fun,’ said Pam, eyebrows up.

Helen sighed. ‘Oh, go on then.’

A week later, Pam rang up to check on the progress.

‘Where did you write my password down?’ Helen said.

‘On the pad next to the computer!’ said Pam.

‘Right, yes, here it is. I’ll log on now, then.’

‘Call me right back.’

There were seven interested people. Seven! Helen had the option to contact anyone she thought she might have a ‘connection with’. She read through cliché after cliché. *Young at heart. Loving living life. Easygoing.*

Pam answered the phone instantly. ‘So?’

‘No good,’ Helen replied.

‘No one sent you a “kiss”?’

‘Just middle-aged men who love living life.’

‘That just means that they can still get it up.’

‘Pam!’

Helen wasn’t even sure if she *could* go to bed with someone. It had been a long time. She put her hands on her stomach. It reminded her of bread dough.

The next day Helen decided to buy a treadmill. She found a website, selected a model and entered her credit card number. Shipping would take seven to ten days.

Helen got everything shipped; she had to. The supermarket man came every Monday between nine and ten o’clock. He’d pull up in the driveway, brakes screeching, and carry all the bags at once, no matter how many there were.

The day the treadmill arrived Helen spent almost five hours walking. The only reason she stopped was to open the front door for Pam.

‘Well?’ Pam said, heading into the lounge room. ‘Any news?’

‘I bought a treadmill,’ said Helen, patting its control panel.

‘I can see that. No, I mean news on the man front.’

The sisters sat down together on the sofa.

‘Oh, I . . .’ Helen looked through the window. The two kids from next door were out, riding their bikes up and down the footpath.

‘You haven’t logged on, have you?’

Helen shrugged.

‘Right, *I’ll* do it then.’

While Helen made two black teas, Pam uncovered a world of eager men.

‘So many to choose from!’ she said, scrolling through the profile pictures.

‘I’m not sure agoraphobia is much of a turn on,’ said Helen.  
‘Nobody’s perfect.’

Treadmill walking turned out to be quite addictive. Some days Helen did fifteen kilometres, all before lunch. She had it set up so that she could look out the window as she walked and pretend she was in the garden, breathing in the crisp autumn air and smelling the neighbour’s lawn clippings.

The next time Pam came round she was in quite a flap. ‘You have to see this!’ she said, turning Helen’s computer on. Helen didn’t stop walking. She’d only done four kilometres. ‘You read it out to me,’ she said, puffing slightly.

‘I can’t read it! It’s a picture!’

Helen noticed the postie ride up, stop at her letterbox, and then continue on. It’ll be the electricity bill, she thought. Pam could get it later. She wondered how much electricity treadmills used.

‘Come on. Come and have a look at him.’

Helen pressed the STOP button and stepped off the slowing belt. The man on the screen looked about forty-five—dark hair, a great smile, twinkly eyes and tanned skin. He was a high school teacher looking for a serious relationship with someone down-to-earth. *A bit clichéd*, Helen thought, *but that smile. And those eyes.*

‘You just need to write him a message,’ said Pam. ‘He already likes you, so it’s easy. I’ll write it.’ She put her hands on the keyboard, ready.

‘No, wait, I’ll do it,’ Helen said.

His name was Rick. Helen suggested a nice home-cooked dinner and gave him her address. Pam wanted to be present when he arrived, but Helen wouldn’t have it.

‘What if he’s an axe-murderer?’

‘I’ll spray him in the face with deodorant.’

In the days leading up to the date Helen spent most of her time walking on the treadmill and staring out at the garden. Sometimes she forgot that she was trapped inside. She felt energetic and optimistic.

Then it was Friday. Helen was sitting at the kitchen table when the doorbell rang. She had her hair up, her bronzer on, eyeliner and mascara in place. She stood up and took a deep breath. The beads

on her top jangled. She pressed each fingernail, one at a time, with her thumbs. The doorbell rang again. She walked to the doorway then stopped. She tried to picture Rick's profile picture, but it didn't help. The doorbell rang a third time, accompanied by a knock. Helen gripped the architrave and closed her eyes.

Pam arrived twenty minutes after the phone call.

'Oh, Hel,' she said, coming into the lounge room.

Helen's nose was red; her bronzer had become a mass of rivulets. 'I thought I'd be able to do it,' she said. 'I thought . . .'

'He was probably an axe-murderer anyway.'

Helen sniffed. 'I watched him get into his car and drive away. He didn't have an axe. He was tall, and dark, and handsome.'

'You're just not ready,' said Pam, putting her hands on Helen's shoulders. 'I shouldn't have rushed you.'

Winter came and went, the sun grew warmer and new green leaves covered the liquidambar in the front garden.

One Monday morning Helen hopped onto the treadmill just as the kids from next door came out of their house and mounted their bikes. Must be a curriculum day, she thought. They rode down their driveway, passed Helen's place then turned around and headed back. Up and back, up and back, they went, squealing and laughing. Helen pressed the button that made the belt go a little faster. She noticed the postie, across the road, pushing a bundle into the letterbox at number thirty-six. The children sped past again, legs peddling furiously. Too quickly the supermarket van was in the street, engine roaring. It turned abruptly into Helen's driveway and she heard a thump, like a bag of oranges falling onto gravel. Only it wasn't a bag of oranges.

Helen lost her footing and went flying off the treadmill. Without thinking, she ran to the front door, turned the handle, and opened it. She could see the deliveryman and one of the children—the oldest—but the other child wasn't visible. For the first time in four years, she stepped outside.

Outside.

Four years, with walls and a roof and security, and now, just like that, *outside*.

But of course Helen didn't have time to think about that, because there he was, lying on the footpath, completely still. As she bent down

to touch him, the postie pulled up nearby, the deliveryman knelt beside her and the mother of the cyclists came running down the footpath. The injured child opened his eyes and Helen gasped. Her breathing quickly turned into hyperventilating and her body began to tingle. Then everything faded.

When Helen came to she saw fluorescent yellow. Somebody was holding her hand.

‘You’re okay,’ he said.

‘The child?’ she mumbled, pushing herself into a sitting position.

‘He’s fine. The ambulance is here. But he’s fine. Just a knock.’

It was the postie, Helen realised. She’d seen him pass her house almost every day for the last four years and this was the first time she’d heard his voice.

‘I need to go inside,’ she said.

Helen liked the feel of the postie’s hand on hers. He helped her up and led her towards the front door.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, once they were in the lounge room.

‘I’m . . .’ Helen looked into his hazel eyes. ‘I’m fine. Thank you.’

‘Do you need anything?’

She glanced outside—the paramedics were still there but the drama was over. ‘I think . . . I think I just need to live life,’ she said.

The treadmill hummed in the background; it was still going.

‘But I might start with a cup of tea. Do you have time to . . .?’

The postie smiled. ‘I’ll put the kettle on.’