

# I AM COUGAR, HEAR ME ROAR

**D**ANNY WAS 29 and working behind a bar when a woman in her 50s started flirting with him. She ordered cocktails with naughty names and eventually one thing led to another.

"I'd never entertained the idea of a female substantially older than myself before," Danny (who asked us not to publish his second name) recalls. He clearly enjoyed the experience though. Since then, he's dated around 20 cougars for anything from a one-night stand to a two-year relationship.

"Two-thirds is sexual," he explains, "but I also find older women more entertaining. You can have a decent conversation with them."

Younger women's idea of fun is a weekend bender, he says. "You can't prise their iPhone out of their hands and they turn everything into a major drama. The mature woman just deals with it and moves on."

"And have you looked on social media? Honestly, Gen Y ... their grammar is shocking!"

Danny is university-educated and fit from a lifetime of martial arts. He appreciates the good things in life – fine wine and dining, a well-cut suit, a nice cologne and an understanding of the possessive apostrophe. So do his cougars.

Cougars are usually portrayed as desperate women out to prey on innocent young men for a sexual thrill. Yet, are they actually maligned and misrepresented, asks **Beverley Hadgraft.**

His preferred hunting grounds, he says, are the eastern suburbs and northern beaches of Sydney. He occasionally taps into the Tinder app for a hook-up or hangs out in boutique bars, but his ideal meeting place is farmers' markets.

How does that work?

"Well, if she's looking at zucchini, I make some sly but intelligent comment like, 'Did you know zucchini is actually a fruit not a vegetable?'"

"Instantly, you've got her attention and your foot in the door."

For those who believe cougars only hang out in second-rate nightclubs in scarlet and stilettos, discovering they're actually perusing organic vegies in jeans and ballet flats may come as a surprise.

"The hot soccer mum, that's the type I like," Danny explains, "although I did once go to a wedding and instead of going home with a bridesmaid I went home with the bride's mother."

"She was divorced," he adds, hastily.

Danny reckons cougars get a bad rap from the media. "There are plenty of 45-year-old men with 25-year-old wives and, socially, that's acceptable, but turn the tables and don't the media have a field day."

Has he pointed this out to his mum when she asks about his love life? She doesn't know, he replies. Nor will she. Cougars are not forever, he says.

Others do not, apparently, agree on this point at least. Many female celebrities are with much younger men. Deborra-lee Furness is renowned for having one of the happiest marriages in Hollywood with Hugh Jackman, 13 years her junior. Kylie Minogue, 48, got engaged to Joshua Sasse, 28, earlier this year. Halle Berry, 49, is currently dating a 27-year-old rapper and Jennifer Lopez has been with Casper Smart, 18 years her junior, since 2011. Then there's Madonna, Susan Sarandon, Kris Jenner ...

These classy women make it okay for others to come out of the cougar closet, says Lucia Demasi, generally regarded as "the queen of cougars". With her blonde hair and smooth skin, ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTINA SOLIJO. STYLING BY LEDA ROSS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY ANDREA HALL. DONNA WEARS TODD LYNN DRESS FROM DEBENHAMS. ALEX MONROE CUFF, WITCHERY EARRINGS AND WANTED SHOES. TANYA WEARS SEED DRESS. H&M CUFF AND SWAROVSKI EARRINGS. BARMAN NOT ASSOCIATED WITH THIS STORY. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.



**"OLDER WOMEN ARE MORE ENTERTAINING. YOU CAN HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH THEM."**

A barman mixes martinis for Donna Karlicki, 44 (left), and Tanya Stapleton, 42.

Lucia looks ageless – an aura she maintains by refusing to ever reveal her age.

Lucia runs The Cougar Club, a US website for cougars and cubs, and has a Facebook page with around 300,000 followers. How did she become cougar royalty?

Demi Moore kicked off the cougar revolution in 2003 when she dated Ashton Kutcher, she explains. The public were fascinated and Lucia, already an established dating and relationships expert, found herself being quizzed about the phenomenon. She's been opining on radio and TV shows all over the world ever since.

According to Lucia, the official definition of a cougar is a woman over 40 who dates men at least 10 years younger. The men the cougars date are cubs and, she claims, there are around eight cubs to every woman.

Really?

"Oh, yeah. I always joke there are a shortage of cougars," she says.

Lucia does a brisk business in "how to catch a cougar" tutorials for these keen cubs. It offers advice about avoiding clichéd pick-up lines like: "You're hot", and never asking her out by text. They get their \$19.97 back if they haven't benefitted after 30 days and are man enough to admit it.

The term "cougars" was actually coined by Canadian ice hockey teams in the 1990s for their older groupies. With its obviously predatory connotations, unfortunately the name has stuck.

"I'd prefer 'timeless goddess' myself but it's not so catchy," Lucia says. "I tell people to look at the positive aspects of a cougar – sleek, strong and in control. The idea they're predatory is a fantasy. How often does an attractive woman of any age have to chase guys? That's just something the media would like you to believe."

Mum of four Donna Karlicki also agrees that it's the cubs doing all the prowling. Aged 44, she's dated seven cubs and is constantly hit on by



younger men. "To be honest I don't understand the attraction," she says. "In Adelaide, where I live, there are so many stunning young girls. I wouldn't do it if the roles were reversed. I often think they have it in their head the older woman is going to teach them something sexually, but from what I hear, it seems younger women are more experienced anyway.

"If you go on something like Tinder, it's just one-night stands, but that's not how I roll. I've got morals and it's nothing but respectful."

Like most cougars, Donna didn't set out to date younger men. Her first cub hit on her when she was out to dinner with friends and, after enjoying the experience of being in control while still having fun, she continued. Her most recent relationship was 26 to her 44 and lasted more than two years.

"I like the fact I know I won't have a future with them," she says. "I don't invest my emotions 100 per cent and I know I won't get hurt because of that. I don't actually want to be head over heels in love with anyone at the moment."

The cubs, meanwhile, get someone who's caring but not needy. "They're proud to be seen with me," Donna adds. "They always want to hold my hand. I make a joke of it if we go to a restaurant and say how everyone must think, what a nice son, they are taking their old mum out for dinner."

Donna roars with laughter. Actually, all the cougars laugh a lot at this strange state of affairs.

Donna has three daughters, aged 19 to 24. "My eldest says, 'Mum, it's disgusting' – as I would've to my mother," she says, laughing. "I don't tell the youngest too much, but they're always saying, 'Mum, this guy thinks you're hot.' They think that's cool.

"I just reckon if Demi Moore can do it, so can I. Men have been doing this for so long. It's about time we took back some power."

### Celebrity cougars

Kylie Minogue, 48, and Joshua Sasse, announced their engagement in February after meeting in September 2015. There is a two-decade age gap between them.



Jennifer Lopez has been with her partner, Casper Smart, for five years. At 46, she is 17 years older than the 29-year-old actor, dancer and choreographer.

Kardashian family matriarch and reality TV star Kris Jenner, 60, has found love with Corey Gamble, 35, since meeting him in 2014. Gamble works for Justin Bieber's manager.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTINA SOLJO. THIS PAGE: DONNA WEARS SHEIKE DRESS, WITCHERY EARRINGS, ALEX MONROE CUFF AND WANTED SHOES. REX FEATURES. GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE: TANYA WEARS MISHA DRESS AND SWAROVSKI EARRINGS.

Tanya Stapleton's experiences with younger men have been less positive. She recently agreed to coffee with a 25-year-old. "He was nice, but more mature than me," she says. "I sat there thinking, 'Wow! So many life goals ...'"

Perth-based Tanya, 42, says she's found other cubs quite aggressive. "They target women in their 40s because they think she'll be grateful.

"They say, 'I'm not after anything serious.' And I reply, 'Oh, you mean nothing more than a couple of hours.'"

"I find that interesting because, like many women in their 40s, I probably look the best I've ever looked and have the confidence to go with it."

So is she going to stick to guys her own age? Tanya sighs. "They have so much unresolved baggage," she says.

The unresolved baggage issue is one Lucia encounters a lot among happy cougars. "The number one reason they like younger men is they have no ex-wives, no children they have to see every other weekend and no alimony.

"Women are now financially independent, which means they can make more honest choices. There have

### "I DON'T ACTUALLY WANT TO BE HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE WITH ANYONE."

been great advances in beauty and they rarely look their age."

And is it true that women in their 40s and men in their 20s enjoy sexual compatibility? "I don't go with that," Lucia says, laughing. "How does that account for the rest of the population being interested in sex?"

Lucia, of course, dates younger men. Like most cougars, that wasn't her life plan, it's just that as she got older, the age of the guys asking her out remained the same.

"I work-out, I do yoga and dance, I travel, I don't have children or the responsibilities other women my age have. I get along with younger men. I have a young spirit, I like men with a young spirit."



When 43-year-old mum of three Juliet Potter told her dad she was dating a man 18 years her junior his response was, "Whatever do you talk about?"

"I told him I talk about the same stuff I talk to every man about. He's 25, he's not 12. He's a mature person."

Juliet looks 10 years younger than she is. She'd had one very brief date with a much younger man, but while beautiful, he was also boring – and she couldn't leave fast enough.

She was in a restaurant with clients in October last year when Marco made eye contact, asked if she was single and confidently asked for her number. They've been together ever since.

With a PR agency and websites that specialise in selling cars to women, Juliet is "all about female empowerment".

Terms like cougar infuriate her. "It's so derogatory," she says. "If Marco was 43 and I was 25, I don't believe it would be mentioned. Why is it even

an issue? The fact we live in a male-dominated society is why.

"We're not chasing these men, they're chasing us. You reach 40 and you're not supposed to be sexy any more, but the reality is younger men find women in their 40s extremely sexy.

"The more of us who come out and talk about it, the more comfortable we're going to feel about it."

Juliet shows me a photo of Marco. "He's so handsome, it's ridiculous," she says gleefully. "Go me!"

Interestingly, Danny emails photos of his latest partner that day, too. "Very tidy for 47," he observes. "I was surprised at first how good women in their 40s looked. I'm not any more."

A few days later, he emails again to tell me about another conquest, this time made in a gym, where his latest squeeze was "reclaiming her body".

He also emails a photo of some zucchini he spotted in Woolworths. "Now, every time I see these, I think of you," he wrote. Spot the predator. ■