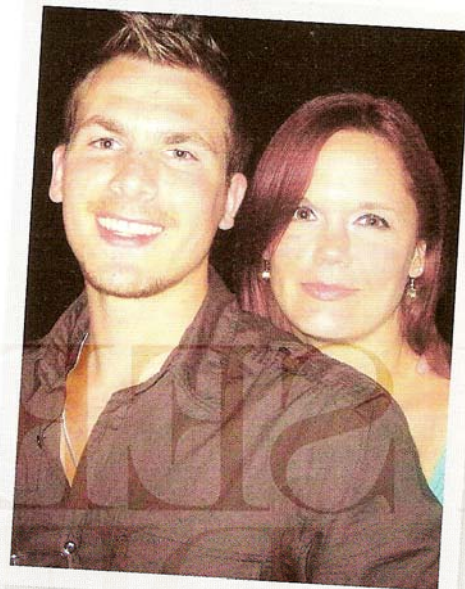


When Dyan Sclanders, now 33, found out the lovely new man she'd met was only 20, nobody thought it could last, least of all her...



'I LOVE A YOUNGER MAN'

I met Klaus in a bar in London in April 2006. He was tall and slim with lovely brown hair and a cheeky smile. I was 32 and guessed he must be about 26. Six years age difference seemed no big deal, especially as I wasn't looking for anything serious. I'd just come out of an 18-month relationship that had ended badly, with a complete breakdown of communication.

Klaus and I spent the evening flirting and dancing and then I asked him how old he was. 'Text me when you get home,' he said. So later, I asked again by text. I was stunned by the reply. 'I'm 20,' he wrote. My flatmate Mel burst out laughing when I told her. 'Trust you!' she said. In the past I'd been out with men a few years younger, but a decade was a first. On impulse, I texted back that I was 26 – thinking I could always own up later.

I laughed along with Mel, but felt a pang of disappointment that made me realise how much I'd liked him. We started dating, but I didn't expect anything more than a fling. I'd normally talk to my friends about a new boyfriend, but I kept Klaus to myself, worried they'd disapprove. Only Mel knew.

Dating Klaus was strangely exciting; like venturing into forbidden territory. After two weeks, we were talking about relationships over dinner, when he told me that he usually went for older women because girls his age weren't mature enough. It seemed the perfect time to come clean, so I admitted my real age. I was terrified he'd be furious that I'd deceived him. But he just laughed and asked why I'd felt the need to keep it a secret.

MAN'

As time went on, I gradually told friends. To justify the age difference, I found myself making a point of mentioning the mature, thoughtful things he did. How he fixed my plumbing, helped with the housework and made my garden beautiful. I knew eventually I'd need to drop the defensive act and stop caring what people thought, but I couldn't help it at first.

Once when Klaus and I were out with a big group of friends for dinner, I overheard one of my friends telling an acquaintance about Klaus and me. 'She's *how* much older?' I heard her blurt out. My friend ssh-ed her and I pretended I hadn't heard. I just laughed it off, but Klaus was livid.

Being with him brought out my fun side. We'd go out dancing all night and I never felt out of place, apart from when younger girls shamelessly tried to chat him up. They seemed to think because I was older, they could win him over. One girl wouldn't take no for an answer; it was as if she couldn't possibly believe I could be Klaus's girlfriend. Flashes of feeling inadequate nagged me, but when Klaus ignored them and lavished

even more attention on me, it drove away any insecurities I had.

Once he travelled across London to give me a bunch of flowers. It was such a romantic gesture. He approached everything with a sense of excitement and youthful curiosity and it rubbed off on me. I began to get more excited about little things such as visiting Buckingham Palace, even though I'd been before.

At times I couldn't help thinking, why would a 20-year-old be interested in settling down, let alone with someone my age? But he would always say, 'Whatever I spend the rest of my life doing, I want to do it with you.' I felt guilty for stealing his prime years, but he was insistent.

Of course, there were downsides. Like him getting jealous when I went out with friends; or wanting to watch *Scooby Doo* when I liked to watch the news. But these were niggles compared to how we could have deep discussions into the night, or make each other fall about laughing. On our anniversary, I came home to find the garden filled with candles and a delicious meal underway. I could see Klaus was nervous and when he pulled out the ring, I realised why. I burst into tears, threw my arms around him and said: 'Yes!'

It feels so good to have a man free of baggage, who makes me feel secure. He's always telling me how beautiful I am and how much he loves

'I'D BEEN OUT WITH MEN A FEW YEARS YOUNGER, BUT A DECADE WAS A FIRST'

being with me. To me, his age is now actually a good thing. He's sexy and loving, and makes me excited about life. □