

And Above All, Lighten Up

Americans approach dating like a job interview, complains

Jonathan Foreman



PEOPLE BACK IN my homeland of England often ask me if American women are as sexually aggressive as they have heard. British males who don't really know this country are convinced that American women are all fierce, perpetually complaining feminists who throw themselves at men with startling force and frequency. "Is it true they just come up to you in bars and ask you to sleep with them?" one fellow asked, his eyes goggling.

The truthful answer is, "Uh, not usually." American women are no more likely to be sexually hyperactive than their British counterparts; in fact, British women are a far better bet if you meet them at a bar. (Surveys have shown that the Brits are the most promiscuous nation in Western Europe—far more so than the French, for all their talk.) Despite this society's openness about sex, American women often have remarkably frustrating sex lives. This is not because American women are in any way prudish. On the contrary. It is mainly because the rules of "dating" wreak such havoc on relations between the sexes.

I have lived in this country for a decade, my father was American, I spent all my school vacations in California, and I still don't really understand what Americans mean by "dating." It is hard to believe, I know, but we simply

don't have "dating" in England. This is not as strange as it sounds. We still have sex lives; we still marry and have children. Indeed, we have successfully done all these things for centuries. This is also true for people in all the hundreds of other countries where no one "dates." In fact, so far as I know, "dating"—whatever it is—scarcely exists outside the United States.

For example, I once heard one of my American female colleagues say, "I'm dating three guys right now, nothing serious." I was stunned. She seemed like such a reticent creature. Could she really be sleeping with three men simultaneously? A friend explained she was not sleeping with them, she was merely "dating" them—in other words going out to dinner with them. I asked this friend—a lawyer—if that meant that any time a man has dinner with a woman they are on a date. Not at all, she explained. For a dinner to be a date, there has to be *romantic intent*. At this point I thought I understood dating. It was a kind of reconnaissance made in a restaurant before two people embarked on a relationship; no carnal activity was involved except eating.

But there are many times when the context is less clear. If I meet an unmarried woman and she tells me that she has been dating someone for three weeks, or three years, what does

she mean? Is she single or not? (As a European, I would be quite happy to treat all attractive women as potential lovers—I was brought up to look at a woman's eyes not her ring finger—but as I live here I would prefer to avoid misunderstandings.)

There are a host of ancillary questions, all of which depend on correct interpretation of this mysterious concept. How do I know if a lunch, dinner, or drink with a woman constitutes a "date"? Many American women feel they should not sleep with you, or in extreme cases, even kiss you, until the second or third "date." Yet some women don't count a dinner as a date if she has invited the man out, or if neither person has used the actual phrase, "It's a date." More quaintly, others require the man to pay for the woman if the occasion is to count as a "date." (Presumably such women see dating as a transaction that is partly financial: Each of the three dates is an installment paid in advance. The man's return takes the form of what lawyers call consortium: a combination of company, domestic work, and sexual favors.) One could go on. What I want to know is how many dates have to take place before you can say you are "dating" someone? When should "dating" someone imply exclusivity? And can you sleep with a woman without "dating" her?

This last goes to the root of what is wrong with the idea of "dating." For the foreigner, the whole weird system with its vagueness and simultaneous rigidity speaks to a linguistic shortage. Americans simply don't have enough words to describe all the variations of sexual relationships. And they are uncomfortable in relationships that are not easily defined by phrases like "engaged to," "one-night stand," or "going out with." This is especially true of American women who are well known to enjoy long, late-night conversations during which they and their consorts endeavor to define and describe their Relationship.

The confused notion of the "date" stems in large part from its origins in a 1950s suburban mating ritual. The original date was essentially a way of formalizing fraternization in an era when arranged marriages were old-fashioned, chaperones were impractical, and automobiles allowed teenagers to escape parental discipline.

The basic idea was that the teenage boy would ask his father if he could borrow the family car for a "date." The boy would then drive the car to the girl's house where he would be introduced to and interrogated by her father. He would promise to drive his date home at a reasonable hour and he'd then take the girl to a movie, a coffee shop, or a dance. In an era when people married young, you were only supposed to date someone if the relationship had a chance of "going somewhere." A date was presumed to be the first step on the road to marriage. Hence parental disapproval if their child dated somebody from the wrong race or class.

We never developed the dating system in England because we couldn't afford cars in the 1950s, or suburbs for that matter. And English cars, for all

their elegance, were either too small and uncomfortable for sex, or driven only by the chauffeur. So as the sexual revolution spread, we developed a system so fluid and practical it is barely a system at all.

I REALLY CAME to understand it as a student at Cambridge in the early 1980s. First of all, everyone drank a great deal (but not beer) and flirted all the time. I would have dinner (or lunch, tea, or drinks) with female friends. Sometimes we would sleep together afterwards. With some girls this became a regular event. With other girls you would sleep with them only once, but continue to see them as friends. With still others, the friendship would always be platonic. It was only when you started to have sex with someone regularly that the nomenclature of your relationship became important. And the questions were: Was this an affair, should you try to keep it secret, or would you start "going out"? It was simple, and great fun.

And it continued when we all moved to London and started jobs, except that about a quarter of the people I knew married within three years of graduation. Three years later another quarter were hitched. After a decade, three quarters if not more of my contemporaries have tied the knot, proving that the English model makes for both happy single people and coupling off at a reasonably young age. It is New York, and not London, that is prowled by thousands of anxious thirty-something men and women, all nervously watching their mirrors for signs of decreasing value.

The dating system may have worked well in 1950s suburbia, but it doesn't work in big cities today. Politically correct puritanism is one reason. Human mating rituals con-

ducted without the benefit of drinking, smoking, and dancing are either joylessly crude or excessively calculated. Without flirtation, they become very dreary indeed. And these days flirting is a dying art. Badly executed flirtation can cost you your career and may land you in court.

Also, in the golden age of the 1950s, people who "dated" usually knew each other from their co-ed high school, or by parental introduction. Questions of suitability were therefore settled long before the actual "date," the main point of which seems to have been to test sexual chemistry. Today, "dating" frequently involves asking someone very boring, bureaucratic questions about their career, their family, and interests.

Blind dates are the worst date of all, essentially a job interview with your sexual self-esteem at stake. And they can wreck your relationships with the people who set you up. Not only might your date reject you out of hand, but when you see her you instantly know what league your friends think you are in. It's like reading about yourself in someone's journal.

So the answer is not to "date." Ask people out to dinner. Go out for coffee in the afternoon. Don't only ask people who are suitable, and don't think of it as "step one" in some kind of scientific experiment. Your oldest and best friend could be the one for you, or your boss. That is what romance is all about: spontaneity, adventure—all things incompatible with "dating." America has given the world many wonderful things, from the cheeseburger to freedom from the Nazis. But "dating" isn't one of them. ♦

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