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“Dating Survival Guide”

Here’s the irony of dating: if you went out with a friend and did the same stuff, you’d have a guaranteed good time. But because it’s a “date,” the stakes shoot up, making the whole experience more unsettling than watching The Blair Witch Project in turbulence.

That’s why I’ve compiled (from countless bull sessions with friends of both genders and my own tumultuous experiences) a Survival Guide to Dating. Click through the tips below to prepare yourself. Sure, the stakes are high. But finding the right person is a jackpot of pure bliss. How you handle the process is up to you.

1. MAKE A **LIST**; CHECK YOUR HEAD TWICE

Worried about the date? Try this ten-minute writing exercise. Make lists of the good and bad things that could happen on the date. Chances are, once you see the bad things written down in front of you (instead of eating away inside you), they’ll seem less threatening. “What if he hates me?” or “What if I belch really loud?” look just a little more ludicrous in black and white.

2. STASH EXTRA **CASH**

...For emergencies and other unplanned stuff: If he turns creepy on you, you might want to pay for your half of dinner—or even a taxi home. If he turns out mind-blowing, you might need it to pay for the motel room. Hey, it could happen!

3. **SHOES** STORY

Okay, maybe it’s just me. But workout sneaks say “yuppie fitness addict,” penny loafers say “too privileged to have much depth.” Keep it simple, elegant, classy. And for God’s sake, leave the, er, “special occasion” pumps at home. Until the third date or so ;-).

4. **DRESSING** DOWN

First dates are dinners, movies, coffee, drag queen shows (Okay, maybe that's just me)—occasions where you're *sitting down* most of the time. That one-piece backless shift may be sexy as hell...unless it's riding up & bunching at the waist like a hospital gown. Pick an outfit that makes you look good when sitting.

5. CONSIDER **CLEAVAGE**

Men like boobs. Your date is a man.

Now, I'm not talking about plunging necklines, I'm not talking about choosing a restaurant with too much air conditioning. Just offer a gentle visual reminder that they're there, and they're yours. You're offering sizzle, not steak. It lets him know you're interested without giving up an iota of power. Know of anything else that can do both of those at once?

Not comfortable with your décolletage? Do the sweater thing. If that's still too brazen (or too warm), opt for the ubiquitous "sweater set", a.k.a. the modest woman's display case.

6. STOP MAKING **SCENTS**

Guys are more responsive to aroma than they think—or at least, admit. The same fragrance over a number of successful dates can have impressive results—but gradually, subtly. Don't overwhelm. It's about building a conditioned response. If you want your Windsong to stay on his mind, take it easy with the perfume on the first clutch of dates.

7. CONTENT **MINTS**

Studies show that mints are only a cover-up for bad breath--temporary at best. But studies **ALSO** show that the scent and taste of peppermint are calming and comforting ("Calming and Comforting"—wasn't that a detective show on Lifetime?). And we could all use that on a first date. So pop a couple. What the hell, at least you can stay minty fresh for the most important part, the initial "hello".

8. (WAY IN THE) **BACKGROUND** CHECK

First dates are often just really sneaky interviews. Job, hobbies, blah blah blah...what's the deal with his LOVE life? How does he treat women, what are the patterns in his

relationships...you know: standard prospective boyfriend inquiries. But beware! Subtlety is key. If he thinks you're prying, he'll close up like a potato bug. It'll take a lot of talking about sports to get him back on an even keel.

9. IT'S NOBODY'S **FAULT**

Okay, maybe a second date isn't in the cards. But do you honestly think that it's just because of you? Get over yourself. So much of this comes down chemistry, or fate, but not fault. Maybe the physical attraction isn't quite there; maybe one of you had an off day; maybe there are other people in the picture (see #8). Or maybe during dessert, his imaginary friend informed him that he doesn't need any more bodies in his meat freezer. No second date? Count your blessings.