

## MY SO-CALLED DATING LIFE

*By Marissa Kristal*

Recently I had a startling revelation: When it comes to being single, I'm an expert.

In some respects, this is great. I'm independent and self-sufficient, and I have absolutely no problem solo-dining or going to the movies alone. But it also means that when it comes to being in a relationship I haven't got a clue.

For me, life in the single lane comes naturally. Like dancing and writing, flirting is more than just fun – it's a way of life. I've been told I flirt with everyone – uh, make that *everything*. Girls, boys, dogs, trees, the questionably-gendered barista(o) at Starbucks; you name it, I flirt with it. Actual sentiment aside, without batting an eye (or perhaps *by* batting an eye), I know all the right moves to catch a man's attention..

But I'm 26-years-old and I can count on one hand the number of times I've actually felt something for a guy that extended beyond the high of the hunt and the thrill of the chase. I'm uber-confident until I meet someone I actually – gasp – *like!* That's when everything flies wildly out of control and suddenly I

lose my cool, and misplace my calm and become the worst thing an unflappable, levelheaded, gifted game player like me could ever possibly be...

*A girl.*

It all reminds me of when I was little and used to go fishing with my dad. When it came to casting my rod, waiting for the nibble, and reeling 'em in, I was brilliant. But the second I lifted the squirmy little bugger into the boat, my rationale and reason went overboard.

"Ew Dad, *ew!* He's gross! So scaly and slimy, get him away from me, quick...QUICK!"

"What did you think was going to happen when you caught a fish, that he'd just magically disappear the second he reached the boat? Sweetheart, the whole point of fishing is to actually CATCH a fish."

Oh. *Right.*

Well, when it comes to relationships, I'm a little like that girl back in the boat. I'm out there fishing – or rather, dating – but when the pursuit ends and I'm standing face-to-face with a real prospect, I undergo a total system meltdown. Simply stated, I can play the game and I can make the catch, it's what happens *after* that utterly eludes me.

So what do I do? Keep at it, I suppose; maybe practice really does make perfect? And in the meantime – for my education and your entertainment purposes – keep a log of all the dreadful dates that make me want to throw back *all* the fish for good!

Observe.

A few months ago a friend set me up with a guy she went to high school with. "He's Jewish, you're Jewish. You're a perfect match!" That should've been my first clue that maybe I would have been better off spending my night in front of the TV with the contestants of American Idol, instead.

When he met me outside my building, beads of sweat were dripping from his forehead and his hands were trembling uncontrollably. "It's okay," I thought, "everyone gets nervous for first dates. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt." But at the restaurant we struggled our way through an hour-long awkward, semi-offensive conversation where he, a Rabbinical student, lectured me about the dangers of not living a Torah-abiding life. During the course of the sermon he told me I was going to hell. *Eight times.*

Next, the waiter, for whatever reason, brought our dishes out one at a time. He set my plate down in front of me, but before I had a chance to dig in, my date grabbed it from me and began gobbling away. I was dumbfounded. "Um, I think that's mine..." I said. "No, it's mine because there's chicken in it." He answered confidently. "But there's chicken in mine, too," I quietly

replied, realizing this was one battle I'd already lost.

A few minutes later his meal came. As the waiter set it down in front of him, he looked at me, *almost* apologetically, and then devoured his food.

When the waiter asked if we wanted dessert, my date rubbed his bulging belly and said, "No thanks we're full."

*We are?*

I ate NOTHING. That's right... nothing! I went on a dinner date and didn't have even a morsel of food. I just may be the cheapest date ever!

When the misery – uh, date – finally ended, I politely thanked him for the wonderful [treacherous] evening, and headed straight to the nearest diner where I ravenously gulped down a (non-kosher!) juicy burger with extra crispy French fries. Oh yes, *and* dessert!

Although I made the firm decision never to go on any more starvation trysts (a.k.a terrible set-ups and bad first dates) again, I broke my own rule when I accepted a date with Keith the Comic.

It was a blustery New York night and I was attempting, unsuccessfully, to hail a taxi on the corner of 55<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. With one hand placed on my hip and the other high in the air, a voice from behind me said, "Wow, it's really hard to believe you can't catch a taxi with that bright red nail polish you're sporting!"

Before I'd even managed to fully swivel my head around to see who was talking to me, I burst into giggles. Mystery Man had a point. The evening before I'd gotten a tad too risqué with my nail color and instead of painting them a subdued pink as I usually do, I opted for Ravage Red.

I looked Mystery Man in the eye and said, "Well maybe that's the problem, my nails are probably blinding every taxi driver from here to Central Park." And with that Mystery Man introduced himself as Keith and proceeded to make me laugh uncontrollably until I finally managed to catch a taxi 20 minutes later. As I was getting into the cab, he asked for my number. I replied with my email address. Never in a million years did I think he'd remember it, but guess who asked me on a date via email last week? If you guessed someone other than Keith the Comic, you're really bad at this game.

Our date was last night. It did not go well. Rather, the date itself went fine, it's just everything that happened before and after that totally sucked.

Before meeting up with Keith I was flustered, not because I was nervous, but because along with a phlegmy cough that chose last night as the perfect time to grace me with its presence, my glands decided to perform their magic swelling act. I thought about bailing, but instead, bad judgment got the better of me.

To my amazement, things were actually going well. We were laughing,

drinking and having a great time; such a great time, in fact, that I decided a reapplication of my new favorite lipgloss, Nars Orgasm, was in order. As I fished through my purse in search of my Orgasm, I noticed the bag felt strangely empty. “That’s weird,” I thought to myself as I continued to fish, “Lipgloss? Check. Phone? Yup, got it! So then what’s missing?”

Oh yes. *My wallet.*

Unsure what to do – I wanted to be certain my wallet had really gone missing before I called out the search parties and exposed my true, absentminded colors to my date – as he talked I continued to “mm-hmm” him all the while shoving my hand further into the depths and crannies of my purse in search of anything that felt remotely like a license, credit card and 50 bucks.

And you know what turned up? Besides my beloved gloss, cell phone and one unwrapped, slightly gooey Ricola cough drop (ew!) – *nothing*. My cavernous purse was completely empty; no wallet, no money and no credit cards.

Aside from feeling like a negligent fool – just a few weeks ago I lost both my coat and car keys in the same night – this meant that unless I wanted to walk 70 blocks home in high heels, I was going to have to ask my date for cab money.

Okay so maybe under the circumstances having to ask for taxi fare isn’t such a terrible thing, but remember, this was a first date, and as I’m familiar with them, first dates are for first impressions. On the bright side, I definitely made one.

To make matters worse, when I finally got home I was greeted by a gargantuan cockroach crawling on the floor. Through heaving sobs I ran into my hallway to see if someone, anyone, was awake and willing to take pity on a wallet-less girl by helping her kill and dispose of her foe, Cockroach. Alas, not one neighbor came to my rescue. Due to a little Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, what happened next is kind of a blur. All I know is that somehow I managed to sweep the creepy critter into a dustpan and send it to its death down the trash-shoot.

The next morning Keith called, not to check that I made it home safely with all my belongings in tow, but to make sure I saved the taxi receipt so I could **fully reimburse him** the next time we saw each other. And this was one time Keith the Comic wasn’t kidding.

Next time? Yeah. *Right.*

It’s bad enough that all my dates play out like a best-of episode of “TV Bloopers and Practical Jokes”, but unfortunately, my dating debacles don’t just happen when I’m out with guys; no, when you’re me, they seem to occur on a pretty regular basis.

I think it's because as a born and raised Minnesotan, by nature I smile at everyone and anyone. Is this good? Kind of. It means I'm polite and friendly and people enjoy being around me. But it also means I see the best in people, even when there's no "best" to be had. Sometimes people take advantage of me, and my "unwilling to ruffle anyone's feathers" self lets them.

A few weeks ago on a rainy Sunday afternoon I grabbed my book and headed for Barnes and Noble. I meandered aimlessly around the small cafe, hoping that during one of my laps someone would have the decency to get up from their table...and give it to me. That didn't happen. But something even more miraculous did.

I was hit on. *By parents.*

He motioned me over to him, the way a seducer beckons his prey. My gut told me to ignore him, to turn and run far away, but he looked innocent enough and he was sitting with a woman who I presumed was his wife. And the idealist in me figured he and his wife were leaving and they were going to offer me their table. So, I went.

"What does SJM mean to you?" He asked.

"Excuse me?!" I replied, perplexed, trying to figure out if he'd accidentally meant SJP, as in, Sarah Jessica Parker.

"Have you ever tried online dating?" he continued.

"It's not really my thing, actually. Wait, SJM...*single Jewish male!*!" I blurted out, surprised that I'd figured out this strange man's secret code.

"Yes! See we have a son and he's 24. He's tried the whole Online dating thing, and it just didn't work out for him. He has horror stories you wouldn't believe! So we've watched him struggle in the dating arena, and frankly, we don't know how he's supposed to meet anyone! He doesn't really go to bars, and the Online thing didn't pan out...so, we're trying this approach now."

"Um, does he know you're doing this?" I asked. "Because if my parents did this, I would probably kill them."

"We've done it a few times, here and there, but when we saw you, we just knew we had to approach you. You have a very friendly smile and pleasant demeanor. You don't see that very often in New York."

"Thanks," I responded, half flattered, half scared.

And then, against my better judgement, I conversed with my future in-laws for over half an hour. By the end of our chat, they told me that they didn't care if I met their son or not, but that I absolutely *had* to keep in touch with them. They invited me to their home for every Jewish holiday from now until eternity and went on to proclaim themselves my New York family.

"If you need anything at all, you just call us. If you're sick, we'll take you

to the hospital. If you need a ride somewhere, we'll offer you our car. If you need a kidney replacement, you can have mine.”

They said they'd never met anyone so amenable before, and that it was a lovely surprise. They didn't want me to leave. They invited me to join them for dinner that evening. Through a gritted plastic smile, but a smile nonetheless, I politely declined. By the time I'd gotten away from my overbearing new family members, I'd forgotten all about their son they'd wanted to set me up with – their reasoning for approaching me in the first place. And apparently, so did they.

The next morning at work, I opened my email and found a letter from my new dad. He went on about how much he and his wife enjoyed meeting me and that they sincerely hoped we could all stay in touch. He reiterated that our meeting was so special because cheerful people like me are a dime a dozen. And he ended his ode by telling me, again, that they will gladly be my NYC family and they would love it if I would join them for all holidays and future family outings.

I was appalled. I hadn't given this man my email address. He Internet stalked me (more commonly known as Googled) to figure it out. As strange as I felt about the situation, I did what everyone would deem the unthinkable: I replied.

I sent a very brief email back thanking him for his kind words. I shouldn't have been surprised then, when he took that as his cue to figure out my work number and call me at the office that same afternoon. And then call, and email, and call, and email, every hour, on the hour, until I finally responded.

He desperately wanted to talk to me because he wanted to impart some imperative career advice, as well as invite me to his wife's surprise birthday dinner that evening. He told me I could choose the restaurant; he recommended we go somewhere in my neighborhood so it was as convenient as possible for me (convenient for me, what about his wife?!). He told me that after he and his wife gave birth to their son (son? What son?), they wanted to have another child – a daughter – but sadly, his wife was unable to bear any more children. And the clincher, as if this sordid story needs one, is when he told me our meeting was “B-sheret” – destiny – I was the daughter they never had but desperately wanted.

In a fit of panic I slammed down the phone and immediately dialed my mom – *my real mom*. “Um, Mom, don't get scared, but I think I might be getting kidnapped. Seriously, you should come to New York NOW. You might have to fight for me.”

Okay, so maybe I'd let things go just a tad too far.

I then did what any calm, rational and highly professional person would do in this situation. I ran crying into my boss's office.

I knew my boss had the one thing I was severely lacking: a backbone. She'd help me weasel my way out of this eerily stalkerish situation that I'd smiled my way into.

But she wasn't going to do it for me. She told me it was high time I learned how to stand up for myself. So she stood over my shoulder as I composed an intensely concise, extremely cutting email – an email that contained none of my characteristic smiley faces or cheerful exclamation points.

"But Kate," I whined to my boss, "this is going to upset him. I can't send this!"

But before I could complete my whimper, she reached over my shoulder and pressed "**send.**"

I was mortified, but that's when I felt it; all of a sudden a backbone replaced my previously flimsy spine. And for the first time in 25 years I felt like I was in control of my life.

Needless to say, the date with their son never happened. But a few weeks later a friend of mine was telling me about the most peculiar thing that happened to her. She was at Barnes and Noble and a friendly looking couple slipped her a card with about 30 ways to contact their single son. As I recounted to her my identical story, we giggled hysterically as we realized we were both hit on...by the *same* parents!

I could give up – perhaps move into a monastery? – and just accept the fact that when it comes to dating, I'm about as lucky in love as Gaylord Focker when he goes to *Meet the Parents*. Or, and maybe this is the better option, despite all my courting catastrophes, I could just keep trying.

Recently I was talking to my 73-year-old father about relationships, and he mentioned to me how sad he thinks it is that my generation is waiting longer and longer to get married. "When I met your mother, I couldn't wait to spend forever with her. If people love one another, why not start a future right away?"

"Because, Dad, things are different now. My generation has certain opportunities and luxuries that yours never had. Now, life isn't just about finding the right person and settling down. It's about finding *ourselves*."

And despite my single-status issues, that's one area where I've gotten it right. I will say this: I am one very capable, self-aware individual.

Perhaps therein lies the answer? Yes, I believe so.

Maybe in the end all it will really take to figure out and find my "us" is to become certain of and confident with my "I."