

## Features.

SHE was gorgeous. And I do mean gorgeous. We had met at a club the weekend before. She had a killer smile, her own teeth and—unlike mine—her curves were in all the right places. Our date started well, with lunch outside Carluccio's in St Christopher's Place followed by a stroll through the West End. At some point we wandered into a posh clothes shop. Much thumbing-through-the-clothes-racks later, my date disappeared into a changing room. A few minutes later we left the shop empty handed. Or so I thought. Half way up the road she opened her bag and proudly showed me a couple of stolen tops. Never having dated a shoplifter before, I wasn't sure how to react. Suspecting the magic may have been broken, she tried to make amends by offering to nick me a pair of jeans. There was no second date.

My dating career, one mishap after another, has ground to a complete halt and I face another Valentine's Day as a single man. But don't pluck those violin strings just yet, because help is at hand, and it comes in the charming form of Mary Balfour, a leading dating guru and MD of Drawing Down The Moon, the UK's very first personal introduction agency. If anyone can get me back on the straight and narrow, it will be her.

The Wallace Room at Durrants Hotel would make the perfect setting for a first date.

At Mary's invitation, we are having afternoon tea. I decide to be mother—no wonder I'm perpetually single—and at least some of the tea lands in Mary's cup. We then decorate hot, fluffy crumpets with butter and jam. This is some kind of wonderful. But now for some date coaching.

One common problem with first dates is just how quickly people write off one another (this is fine in the case of shoplifters). As Mary explains in her First Date Toolkit, a first date is an exam where both parties assess each other minutely. Therefore, stress levels are going to be high, making it unlikely you'll be relaxed enough to dazzle each other with your charisma.

“Even if only one of you feels stressed, the dynamic isn't conducive to this meeting moving on to a second date, even if it's a match made in heaven,” says Mary. “The reason: if you're not fairly relaxed then it's difficult to be genuinely flirtatious. And no flirting equals no chemistry. This is why so very many singles go from date to date saying they simply can't find ‘the one’.”

Mary suggests an alternative strategy: domino dating. “My domino dating mantra is: as long as your date is a ‘maybe’—at least ‘friendship material’, has similar cultural background or values, is reasonably attractive, or you've had a few laughs—see them again.

A  
**DATE**  
WITH  
DESTINY

Scarred by past experiences,  
the Marylebone Journal seeks  
to learn the secrets of successful  
dating with the help of a local  
introductions agency

WORDS: JEAN-PAUL AUBIN-PARVU



## Features.

### A date with destiny

Don't worry whether you fancy each other sexually or not. Just ask yourself: 'Are they a fun human being and would I enjoy another hour of their company?'"

But this feels counterintuitive. I reckon I can spot chemistry within seconds of meeting somebody. Mary would beg to differ. "Ask eight couples what they thought of each other when they first met," she says. "You'll find that in the vast majority of cases, they didn't fancy each other on the first date yet ended up head over heels in love."

Now on to the first date itself. Mary believes in keeping it short and sweet. "Be clear beforehand that you can't meet for long. A first date should last a maximum of 90 minutes. Then if you're panting to get away, there's no embarrassment, because your date already knows you won't be staying. So many people go out for dinner on a first date. That's stupid. You will probably expose yourself emotionally far too much and you've got no escape route."

And don't be tempted to extend the date if it's going really well. In fact, that's precisely the time to cut it short. "That way you'll still have some easy conversation left for next time," says Mary, "and you'll create a feeling that there's a lot more to discover about you."

So what about the venue? A decent bar often does the trick, one that is easy for both parties to get to and from. "Somewhere a bit quirky is always interesting. Nothing bland. And try to find a venue where the acoustics allow you to hear each other without leaning forward too much. You don't want to shout or seem as if you're moving into her body space."

According to Mary, there are many dating turn-offs, from bad breath, body odour, scruffy shoes and dirty finger nails to negative body language and constantly checking your phone. And I'll hardly impress my date by being rude to the bar staff, though neither should I flirt outrageously with them.

Men, particularly when nervous, tend to monopolise the conversation and talk far too much about themselves, "and the woman will complain to her girlfriends: 'narcissistic, self-centred, didn't ask me a single question,'" says Mary, who also points out that women tend to collude by listening begrudgingly and passively.

There are topics of conversation best avoided. "A first date is much too soon to start talking about either your life goals or your emotional history," says Mary. "It may be very tempting to

# Q

## MARY BALFOUR OF DRAWING DOWN THE MOON

### Have you always played cupid?

I've always been very curious, nosy and a bit of a control freak. I like organising other people, and that includes relationships. I remember as a child trying to get my teddy to marry my pet rabbit. But the rabbit ate the teddy, because it was stuffed with straw. So that did not go well.

### How did you get into the dating business?

I've done many interfering jobs in my life. I was always passionate about helping people who haven't had opportunities and for many years I worked in adult education. But in the early 80s the government started slashing educational budgets and I was having to sack tutors and workshop facilitators. I got totally fed up and began asking myself what I'd like to do. I decided that putting people together for love would be wonderful.

### How did you go about it?

A friend told me to go to Bloomsbury and take a look at Drawing Down the Moon, so off I trundled to this rather erudite, alternative bookshop on Bury Place, opposite the British Museum, which had a big neon sign outside. You could go in, buy a book, pop downstairs and see the owner, also called Mary, and she'd fix you up with a date. She had a good number of clients and was looking to sell, so I bought it from her.

### How does a personal dating agency compare to something like Tinder?

What's different about a personal dating agency is that we do all the hard work. We will select, interview and ID check people. On Tinder, or the internet generally, you will find that a lot of people lie about their age. Everybody over 40 or 50 is tempted to put up an old photograph. Guys will lie about their height. So you may not be meeting quite the person that you thought they were. But with us that won't happen.

### Who uses Drawing Down the Moon?

Mainly educated, busy professionals in London and the south-east, but we also have an international section. Our clients include people who've been divorced and bereaved. We also take separated people, providing we're sure that the relationship is over and they are ready to start afresh. Age is very important. We take women from 24-25 up to late 60s, and men from 29 up to 70 plus.

### So you don't take on everyone?

We only take on somebody if we feel we can genuinely match them. We always do a sort of pre-interview over the phone and then they come in for a chat to find out all about them and what they're looking for. Then we tell them honestly whether or not we think we can match them. Sometimes we headhunt men for the simple reason that there's an incredible shortage of relationship-minded guys, especially over 45. But we will only invite them to join if we have particular members in mind for them.

## How comprehensive is the interview process?

If you'd come in as a prospective client, by now I'd know all sorts of stuff about you—almost too much information. I always ask about previous relationships and how long they lasted, and I want to know why they didn't work out. Are they continually attracted to the wrong kind of person? Are they projecting their own needs onto another person? And I'm always interested in how they describe their ex. Is it friendly, critical, acrimonious? If somebody has split up with their ex in a loving, caring and friendly way, they are more likely to enter a new relationship without problems.

## How successful are you?

The main indicator of our success is that 75, maybe even 80 per cent of new joiners heard about us through a friend or relative who we matched up. We had our 30th anniversary party recently and it was packed out with people. But it was only the tip of the iceberg, because it's probably running into tens of thousands over 30 years.

## Is it a fun job?

Oh, it's just lovely. We get cards sent to us with photographs of babies! But success can be measured in different ways. Say you'd been married for 20 years and your marriage has broken up, or you're bereaved, and you haven't dated since you were in your teens, often there's a confidence issue. Just going on dates and learning that you can do it, that you can flirt again, can give you tremendous confidence. That's a success in itself.

bring up matters that are critically important to you at the outset, and thus avoid wasting your time on someone who might run a mile when you 'announce' them later. But you need to be sure that the other person is ready to share these issues with you before you bring them up."

As far as dating turn-ons go, it begins with a good first impression, making an effort to be well turned out, clean and tidy. And then trying to keep the conversation fun, upbeat and light-hearted. "If possible, try to find out as much as you can about your date's interests beforehand, so you can ask questions," says Mary. "And it's well worth brushing up on current affairs, both serious and more light-hearted and gossipy."

Mary moves onto the art of seductive conversation. "Proactive listening is the technique of reflecting back what your companion says or feels," she says. "For instance, if they are talking about a particular topic, say: 'obviously you really enjoy cycling/Mozart' or whatever. This sort of response shows you can relate to their feelings. If you want them to feel you've understood them properly, try checking what they're saying by paraphrasing the essence of it back."

What else can help to raise the temperature? "Maintaining eye contact for just a millisecond longer is so powerful," says Mary. And a well-timed compliment works wonders, as does dropping your date's name into the conversation. "There's a beguiling resonance in the sound of one's name being uttered by a relative stranger in an intimate context."

Friendly flirting is also key. To be honest, I wouldn't have a clue whether a girl was flirting with me or whether she just had something in her eye. Mary recommends the Allan Pease book: *Body Language—How to Read Other's Thoughts by Their Gestures*. "And a bit of homework for you might simply be to watch couples in cafes," she says. "Try and imagine what people are saying to each other by watching what they're doing."

And I need to be able to flirt with my date. But what if I'm not sure how? "There are flirting courses you can go

on," says Mary. "You can learn to flirt." But since we're here, how about a few pointers? "The eye contact and the compliment is really the best opener."

I should also be tactile. "NOT WITH HER," exclaims Mary. "But stroke or touch your wine glass to show that you're in a sort of fluttery, relaxed mood. And keep looking at her—not too much, of course, don't stare."

Mary tells me to practise friendly flirting whenever possible, for example, with the staff at my supermarket. She clearly hasn't met the blokes who work behind that particular meat counter.

So how should I end a date if I really don't fancy seeing the girl again? "Thank them for taking the trouble to meet you and say you've enjoyed talking, but you don't feel you want to take it any further for the moment as you're seeing lots of people," says Mary. "Our members say they much prefer a more honest approach because they know where they stand."

But what if I do want to see her again? "Don't put yourself in the way of rejection," says Mary. "I would suggest that towards the end of the evening just say to her: 'It's been really nice meeting up. Shall we give each other a ring in a few days?' This implies that any further initiative is evenly shared, thus neither of you feel pressured."

I finally broach the most delicate subject of all. "If you really fancy someone on a first date don't have sex, because if the sex doesn't work out, that's probably the end of it," says Mary. "And sex often doesn't work out first time round."

It sounds like the key to successful dating is to play the long game. "We say to go for the slow burn," says Mary. "It's a good strategy not to be forward, because it keeps the other person on their toes. It keeps them curious and wanting to see you again. Then you'll have more to learn about each other on the second and third dates." Mary watches me furiously taking notes. "We could turn you into a Casanova in two weeks," she laughs.

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