

In the first of a four-part series, **Tessa Souter** reflects on the tricky business of boy-meets-girl in the modern world

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Date expectations

WHEN I WAS married, I borrowed an answering machine from British Telecom. Its previous user, a young woman, was obviously single because there were 10 messages from various men (and one woman) in lustful pursuit. From the pleading: "Please say you'll come tonight!" to the intriguing: "God! I'm so sorry about the other night. You must think I'm an animal!" it all seemed very exciting and glamorous. Then, Now I realise that of those 10, probably half were positively unattractive, at least one was a psychopath and the rest were teenagers. In fact, three years down the road — and rather less innocent — I have to say there's only one thing wrong with being single in the nineties. Dating.

This delicate stage when you are deciding whether or not you like someone enough to become more serious ought to be simple, but it's not. From who pays and how to dress, to whether — and, if so, when — to have sex, it is fraught with questions nowadays. Is it OK for a woman to ask a man out? Should you play hard to get? Should the man pay? Should you insist on paying your share? Should you pay? Post-feminism, these concerns seem absurdly archaic — in theory. In practice, however, things are a lot more confusing than they used to be.

"When I was first dating in the sixties, it was simple," says 47-year-old Kathy. "There was a definite ritual. You were called up by different boys, they paid, you went out with several at once and you didn't sleep with any of them. Now it's a free-for-all, sex is expected right off the bat — which adds a kind of intimacy you're probably not ready for — and nobody knows the rules any more."

Back in the fifties and sixties, the power base of dating was related to male and female roles in society. The woman was paid for because she didn't have an income and withholding sex was one of the few ways in which she could exercise her power. In the heady free love seventies, when everyone "dropped out" and no one had money, there was an equality in sexual encounters that made it seem OK to sleep with someone you'd just met. That sense of equality is strangely missing nowadays, however — perhaps because even though women in the nineties earn too, men still earn more. And now that women can pay their own way, the issue of who pays has a lot more riding on it.

"What does it mean when a woman

Anatomy of love in the nineties Part 1: Dating

allows you to pay?" asks 28-year-old Mark, who says it can be demoralising when a woman insists on going Dutch. "One time a woman even wrote me a cheque on the spot for bargain matinee cinema tickets," he exclaims. "It was insulting."

In that woman's defence, I can attest to having been on dates where I've felt that the man's paying for dinner was a way to assuage his guilt that all he wanted from me was sex.

"I like to be paid for on a first date," says Susan, who is in her early forties. "But I don't like it if they never let me pay. I stopped seeing someone who was like that. I felt like I was being bought."

Cynthia, who is in her late twenties, was taken to a very expensive restaurant and paid for on a first date. "But I found myself on the way home in the taxi thinking: 'Was I worth it? Was I entertaining

'Going on a date is a test and one's natural reflex is to pass it, even if that means cheating'

enough?" which indicates that women still feel obliged to give something in return for being taken out for dinner — even if, post-Aids, it may not be sex any more. On the other hand, physical intimacy is now so much the norm that not to have sex early on in a relationship is almost making too big a deal of it. It's as if the sensation of risk-free sex that comes with using a condom actually makes people less careful who they sleep with. The new sign of commitment in the nineties is going off to have an Aids test together so you can stop using condoms.

Getting to that stage, however, seems to be harder than ever. Five months into what has recently become what she refers to as "an erotic friendship", because she is "afraid to say 'relationship' and all that implies", Kathy has become a nervous wreck. "Now that sex is

involved, I no longer know whether I should call him or expect him to call me. If I call, will he think I'm trying to ensnare him? Is the term casual sex an oxymoron? What is it reasonable to expect emotionally from a man with whom you've been physically intimate?"

If only it were as simple as asking. However, one of the few rules of dating seems to be that there is no frank communication. "Everything is communicated in a kind of code," says 35-year-old Andre, who is single. For example, Friday and Saturday nights are more special than Thursdays which mean more than Wednesdays. The worst nights are Monday and Tuesday. Sunday nights almost count as weekend (prime time), lunch means more than dinner which means more than coffee. Not knowing the code could cause you to lead someone on merely by going out with them on a Saturday night. Added to this is the further complication that the overt communication often consists of blatant untruths, commencing on the first date with the biggest lie of all — that neither of you is interested in having a relationship with anyone, let alone each other.

"Can't we just be honest and say: 'I'm interested in you, are you interested in me?'" Kathy asks. Apparently not — which is why you might find yourself having dinner on a Sunday night (because of course you're far too in demand to be available on a Friday or Saturday), looking casually stunning (in a "What, this old thing?"), sitting across the table from a virtual stranger who doesn't even speak the same language as you do, and if they did would probably be lying. Because the truth is, going on a date is a test and one's natural reflex is to pass it, even if that means cheating.

"Most people see the problem of love as that of *being* loved rather than of one's capacity *to* love," says psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in *The Art Of Loving*. Thus the challenge of dating is not to find out if you like the other person, but to get them to like *you* — even to the extent of pretending to be something you're not.

"I once dated a girl who let me order all meat dishes at a Chinese restaurant. She ate pork!" Andre says. "I didn't find out for weeks that she was a vegetarian."

Needless to say, this relationship was doomed from the start — but at least they got as far as a first date. For many people that's the biggest hurdle. "In these days of virtual offices, how do you even meet



Take two . . . Bridget Fonda and Matt Dillon look for love in *Singles*

PHOTOGRAPH WARNER

people?" asks Susan, who once dated someone she met while cleaning her car on the street. Margo, an attractive 33-year-old, was so frustrated that she placed a personals ad. "I didn't meet anyone I wanted to stay with but I went out on lots of dates and none of them was a loser."

It's not for everyone, though. "I couldn't possibly!" exclaims 26-year-old Frieda, who is so concerned not to appear desperate that she has turned down dates merely, she says, "because I didn't want them to think I hadn't got anything better to do."

Meeting people in pubs and clubs is similarly fraught. "I have set up dates from meetings in bars but I chicken out at the last minute," Frieda says. "You never know who they are."

Another problem with the public pick-up is its emphasis on the physical. Anyone who has ever dressed up for a date knows the dilemma of wanting to be found attractive at the same time as not wanting to be valued only for one's looks. When Jennifer was asked out while

walking her dog in the park, she felt angry. "I wanted to say: 'Why? You don't even know me!'" And Teresa was not flattered when a man told her she looked as if she should be sitting in the "passenger seat" of someone's Porsche.

To be valued for one's beauty is the cheapest thrill of all, but few people nowadays are actively seeking the fifties prototype girl (or boy) next door. Dating in the nineties is about having it all, which means Marie Curie in Cindy Crawford's body or Einstein in Tyson Beckwith's.

Which brings me to dating dress codes. "I don't like it when a woman is too dressed up for a first date," Nick says, yet Andre was put off a woman because she wasn't dressed up enough. The obvious answer is to dress for yourself. At least then you know one of you will like how you look. Because there's just no pleasing some people. "No existential chemistry," Margo says about her recent date with a handsome, sexy, intelligent man who did everything right. But perhaps he wasn't shown off to

his best advantage, given the grueling circumstances. "Wondering if you've got spinach on your teeth and nervously pushing your hair back so much you've got food in it is not the most relaxing way to spend an evening," Cynthia adds.

"You've got it all wrong," says Carol, the most successful dater I know. Carol asks men out, sleeps with them on first dates, tells them exactly what she wants in bed and calls them afterwards if they don't call her, even if that means looking them up in the telephone directory. A small hoard of panting males follows her wherever she goes. One of the pluses of dating in the nineties is that women are now allowed to acknowledge their sexuality. "It's about doing what feels good for yourself," she says.

The best dating advice I've heard for the nineties, however, is Steve's. "When I first dated, I always used to be wondering if they were someone I could marry," he says. "Now I just think, do I like them enough to go out on another date?"