

# The Dating Game

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I AM A SEASONED VETERAN in a sport known as The Dating Game. I can provide not only a vast list of references, but I have been playing this game for over half of my life. The Dating Game gets more attention than the Super Bowl, the World Series, Wimbledon, and the Stanley Cup all put together. The Dating Game is a billion dollar industry, involving cosmetics, fashion, restaurants, automobiles, movies, self-help books, dating services, personals, and the Internet—all designed to help people at least get up to bat. Most of the money is spent in these industries in an attempt to win the grand prize—a lifetime of happiness with the person you played the game with. However, if you miss playing the game, you may always trade in your prize in the hopes of finding a better one. Although it is unethical to hang on to one prize while searching for another prize, some people will do just that. This is known as cheating, and if a foul play is called, the player may lose both prizes and be stuck with heavy penalties. People may play The Dating Game on either side of the field against their opponent. However, if you are playing on the same side of the field as your opponent, it is recommended you use more protective gear and safety measures. As the game is played through the years, rules are often changed or updated.

I have always played games with intentions of winning. I have always had a strategy planned out. When playing Monopoly I try to own the red, green, and yellow properties. Statistically, there is a higher probability of an opponent landing on that dreaded corner of the board rather than Boardwalk or Park Place.

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The key to chess is to make a few silly moves to catch your opponent off guard. There is only one way to win at Scrabble and that is by working the words into double and triple value squares. I am a board game champion, but I can't seem to triumph at The Dating Game. I did win once, but my prize was defective. I traded it in for another play. After a few times around the field, I got benched for nine months. So now I am playing again with a different set of rules. My rules. My new playbook allows me to be more aloof and I like that. I can remember my first time playing The Dating Game and I was horrible. I thought I was doing well at the time, but reflecting back, I should have been coached. So I am also going to debunk a few myths on how to play The Game.

My first love was a boy named John. He reminded me of the bass player in the band Duran Duran. He wore a brown leather cap (yes, those were popular back then). My only goal in life was to get my hands on that hat. Whenever a girl wore an article of clothing that belonged to a boy, it symbolized a relationship. I would have been the envy of Griffin Memorial School. I never said anything to him or any of my friends about my intentions. I was very content writing endless pages about him in my diary and admiring him in the school hallways. One day that all changed. Panic had settled in. John had become friends with my older brother and he was going to sleep over. John slept over a lot. I loved it, I hated it, and I thought I was going to die. My brother had the incredible talent of pointing out each and every flaw I had. My brother had taken John on as his Grasshopper. Chris was the master and John his apprentice. It took no time for John to learn the art of teasing me ruthlessly. John became my bother.

Rule number 1: never fall in love with someone who has the ability of becoming like your brother. To the women who think it must be great to have a brother with cute friends; you are wrong. It is a myth. Not only will a brother have all of his friends tease you, but also he will want to kick the butt of any guy you want to bring home. However, it is sort of comical to watch the expressions of guys who think they are about to die at the hands of my wimpy brother. I have repressed anxiety from my adolescent years and now as an adult, and with my new rules, if a guy reminds me of my brother, he is out the door.

If psychotics were steel, then I am a magnet. I seem to attract them and have a unique blindness that gives me the ability to overlook any signs of their special

qualities. My new set of rules to The Game has supplied me with a mental checklist to be able to determine any unordinary idiosyncrasies. I only wish I had the checklist while dating Matt. I met him when I was working my first job at a department store in New Hampshire. Matt became my entire world.

Rule number 2: never let a guy become your entire world. Matt was a year older and attended a different high school. I only saw him when I was at work but we would take our breaks together. Matt was all I would talk about at my school, and I know I irritated my friends by constantly talking about him. Matt and I would meet at the park, a quiet secluded booth in Pizza Hut, or just hanging out in his car. Matt opened my eyes to the world for the first time and eventually became my first lover. Matt also taught me that men can be real jerks. Because I made him my focal point of the universe, he was able to control me like a puppeteer. He would pull the strings and I would dance. When he left for college, he took my world with him. It was New Year's Eve 1997 when he came to my house. I was having a huge party since my parents were out of town. I had the night all planned for him and me. It was all I could think about since Thanksgiving. He came to the door. All my friends were there. He had a date. My brother and about four of my male friends chased Matt and his date to the end of the block. I chased a fifth of Smirnoff. To the women who think getting drunk is the answer in a break-up: you are right; that is not a myth. However, the hangover and the cleanup are not worth it. I never saw Matt. My new set of rules does not allow me to give up my life and my goals. With Matt I had given up everything.

Dating Matt also brought another set of rules. Rule number 3: Do not date men from work. Sure, you get a thrill from the chase, and it makes time on the clock go by quickly, but I have to stand my ground that it is not worth it. George is another man I met at work. He was not someone I would pick out of a crowd, but he had an incredible personality. Every morning he came over to smell my perfume. I couldn't wait to be sniffed in the morning. We eventually started going out with a group of other coworkers. We had a blast. I never told him I had fallen for him. One night after one of our escapades through Five Points, we went back to his apartment since I had left my car there. I asked to use his bathroom, so I went inside. I came out of the bathroom and whispered to George that his toilet flushed very loudly. He grabbed me, pushed me up against

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the wall and kissed me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he carried me to the bedroom. I woke up in love. I will never forget the magic words, “Your toilet is so loud.” Hello, get real! I was vulnerable. To the women who think men like drunken women, you are right. However, it is best to make sure they like sober women before you go to bed with them. George treated me differently at work and when we went out. He said it was a mistake and I had accepted that. George eventually ran from me as I chased him down with my car. I never planned on hitting him; I just liked watching him run. I will throw in a bonus rule for the men reading this. When you have taken a girl to bed with you for the second time and she asks why, do not reply with, “I thought, what the hell?” The girl behind the wheel of the car may not be as nice as I was. My new rules do not allow me to get drunk with men, just controllably buzzed.

The night I met my prize in The Game I was out with my customers. No, I am not a call girl; I was working at a bar. The customers were two guys that I would frequently wait on. My shift was ending and we all decided to go out. My choices of where I could go were limited since I was not quite twenty-one yet. If a bar did not card at the door, I was fine because I looked much older. We were sitting at a table when I saw him. His smile sparkled like a toothpaste commercial. I pointed him out to my friends, and they dared me to pick him up and make out with him by the end of the night. In a nutshell, I got my bill paid by my friends and married that same Colgate man. His name was Rich. After I “picked him up,” we talked until the sun came up. We went out for breakfast and I knew he was the one. We were inseparable. At least until he joined the military. I didn’t want to wait for him. Then I got his letters. It started all over again. I found myself in a car driving from South Carolina to Chicago to attend his boot camp graduation. We were engaged four months later. I had won The Game.

After a wedding and a honeymoon to Jamaica, we moved to Virginia Beach. I was a Navy wife. They say it never lasts. It didn’t. I made it though many deployments, patiently waiting for him to come home, sometimes six months at a time. When Rich would come home from a long cruise, he was a little different. The last time he came home he was a lot different. We were living in Houston by then, since I had gotten transferred for my job. He hated Texas and left on the anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I don’t know which was

worse, losing The Game or losing my stereo. I sure do miss my stereo. I cried that night. The next day I was ready to play The Game again. I admit I was rusty, but I knew it had to be like riding a bicycle. The only advice I can give here is the old cliché: there are other fish in the sea. I will elaborate, though—some are sharks, some are octopi, some are guppies, and there are a few gold fish, too. Rule number 4: A woman needs a man like a fish needs the desert. Life is too short to be upset over a man—and that is not a myth.

Time to move on. Time to play. Time to meet the freaks. During the time following the break-up, I was introduced to a vast array of some of the most interesting male specimens that Houston had to offer. It was awful. I had one date who wanted to show me how fast his car could go. Nothing like impressing a girl by letting her face death. Then there was the date who, throughout dinner, talked about how broke he was. I felt guilty when the check came and left the tip. I also met one who told me it was best I didn't know why he was incarcerated. Home by 8 p.m. I can never forget my favorite one to talk about. We met and played darts; we were having a great time. He seemed so normal. He asked if I was hungry and suggested we go to his apartment with pizza and watch a movie. Sounded great to me. He even set up a picnic. He pressed play. The music gave it away. Nothing like impressing a girl by letting her look at porn. It was hopeless. I was about to give up at The Game.

Then I met Scott, the one true love of my life. He made me feel like a princess. I thought I had won again. I did get a prize, my son William. Scott was not ready to be a father. We tried to make it work, but things did not work out between us. That was when I got my new set of rules. Things are different when you are a mom. Things are different when you have been scorned. Things don't matter as much when you build a wall around yourself, playing it cool, playing without getting attached. Playing The Game is fun when you are not trying to win. I moved back to South Carolina, and it is here where I continue to play. The only advice I can give with this is don't be afraid to play by your own rules.

Have you ever had a temporary moment of insanity? I have. Twice. I wanted to prove I was not superficial. I am, to a certain extent anyways. To women who think you don't need to have a physical attraction to be in love, that is a myth. Rule number 5: be attracted, very attracted. A man doesn't need to be perfect and beauty is skin deep, but there also has to be a physical attraction.

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The biggest mistake I have ever made at playing The Game was settling with someone I was not happy to be with. More advice is don't settle; don't be with someone for the sake of being with someone. After my son was born, I hibernated. Once I decided to start dating again, I settled because I was afraid of playing, afraid of rejection. Like being sent to jail in Monopoly, rejection is just one of the cards dealt to you while playing The Game. Be ready for many cards.

Rule number 6: rejection is okay.

Did I shave my legs for this? Some of my best advice is don't ever get set up with a man who has lost some spare change. Translation: If a man gets dumped by a girl named Penny, just say no. In the summer of 2000, I stuck it out. Big time loss in The Game. My coworker had been wanting me to meet his friend Tim for a long time, but he was dating a girl named Penny. Eventually my coworker gave me his friend's Internet screen name. I found him playing in the cyber playground. We connected. Really connected. I had never met anyone so witty. I couldn't wait to talk to him. I almost passed out when he announced he would be coming into town to meet me. I was floating on air. First step childcare, second step shave legs, third step new bra. Finally, Friday night was upon me. I tried to remain calm. The doorbell rang. Deep breath. I opened the door to my version of Mr. Wonderful. We went out to a dueling piano bar and had dinner in a basket with a few beers. We got back to my place and sat on the couch, a couch I could imagine using a lot with him. He put his arms around me and held me tight. I rubbed his back. Content. But wait, a lot of time had passed; was he sleeping? Was I a crutch? I pushed him back, unable to tell what he had been doing. He started to kiss me. His tongue entered my mouth; he stopped. He looked away. "Damn her!" He sat up, looked at me and walked out. I wanted to chase after him: "Wait, you didn't see my new bra!" Instead, I swallowed my pride, and stared at the door, waiting for it to open. Headlights shined through the blinds then disappeared. Ten o'clock. Ten o'clock; it couldn't be. I went to my bed. Alone. I should have been crying, but I wasn't. I refused to cry over a jerk. I sat up, brushed myself off, and went out. When I arrived at work on Monday, my coworker asked me how my date went. I replied, "Which one?" I felt strong, but I was still mad. I had shaved my legs, although I do love my new bra.

So, here I am, writing about The Game while playing it. There are a few

prospects I am playing with, but no one I can consider victory. The hardest part of dating at thirty-one is not only finding a partner who isn't gay or married, but finding someone who does not have issues. Issues are defined as someone who can't take care of himself, someone who is emotionally handicapped, someone who has no world outside college football, and someone who has Norman Bates Syndrome. I try not to let anyone introduce me to anyone, and I prefer playing the game without any assistance. My favorite places to play the game are very different from one another. The bookstore is a great place to meet someone on an intellectual level. Banana Joe's is a great place to meet someone on a non-intellectual level. The best way to play is to remember it is only a game. When you do win, hopefully you will never have to play again, but enjoy playing while you can. Enjoy the eye contact, body language, and playful smiles. Enjoy being single, enjoy being safe, but don't be afraid of getting hurt. That is my best advice and my own personal rule.