



The Meeting Game

Do singles bars make your blood run cold? Good for you. There *are* better ways to find Somebody Nice in a city filled with somebodies

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

Okay, let's suppose you've just gotten back from, say, a singles' resort where you and a friend went to "meet people." (You really wanted to see some Indian ruins in Guatemala, but who could you expect to meet in the jungle? Buster Crabbe? Sheena?) So you traveled to this tropical singles' bar and you went to the cocktail lounge every evening and the disco every night. You smiled so much you finally had to put Vaseline on your teeth to get your lips to slide over them. You joined in every activity known to modern man. And the result was . . . zilch. Zero. One big nothing. Oh, you had some fun, even a romantic interlude or two (as they say on television game shows), but the only person you really would have liked to see again came from Minneapolis, and the closest you get to Minneapolis is "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." To make matters worse, your friend liked Minneapolis too and didn't utter one word to you on the entire flight home.

So you figure, well, at least you got a good tan, and you start looking in the paper for group summer houses. Maybe the love of your life couldn't afford the singles' resort this year, but will turn up at the beach this summer. Maybe, but probably not.

Now suppose you are back in town, riding the *(Continued on page 106)*

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MEETING GAME

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crosstown bus home one evening in early spring. You're engrossed in a marvelous new book. You glance up to see if the bus is nearing your stop, the last one on the route, and you find yourself looking into a nice pair of brown eyes belonging to an even nicer-looking individual sitting diagonally across from you on the almost empty bus. You go back to your book, no longer quite so engrossed, and when you look up again you find the brown eyes are once more turned in your direction. This time you give their owner an unmistakable smile before returning to your book. Finally, when the bus reaches its final stop, where, felicitously enough, your fellow traveler is also heading, the two of you are chatting tentatively. Before parting on the sidewalk, you decide to meet each other later on for a drink. You then head for your apartment, feeling rather pleased with yourself and with the world in general.

The difference between these scenarios—the first taken from a friend's experience, the second from one of my own—is at the heart of a simple but somehow obscured premise: Don't go places to meet people; meet people in the places you go.

I stumbled upon this premise, as I invariably do upon stairs, one step at a time. The first step was discovering early on that all the advice I'd read and heard on how to go about meeting people was a load of old bushwa. In order to follow that advice, I realized, I'd have to put myself in a lot of places where I didn't want to be: singles' bars; singles' resorts; singles' apartment houses; political clubs; church groups (church groups!); and adult ed courses in accounting.

The second step was discovering that even if I did put myself in one of those places, everybody else would be there for the same reason, and the tension would be so thick you could cut it with a fork. Spontaneity, genuineness, both would fly out the window as fast as their little wings could carry them.

Phony Singles' Bars

My impressions were in no way unique. I have never talked to anyone, male or female, who has had a good word to say about singles' bars. Everybody I've ever spoken to agrees that they are forced, phony, tacky—and useless when it comes to forming a respectful, positive attachment between two people. Indeed, after discussing singles' bars with enough men and women, I wonder how the places come to be as crowded as everyone says they are, and I begin to suspect it's another case of the Nuremberg rallies held by the Nazis in Germany in the thirties. (Since no

German has ever admitted to attending one, who were all those people?)

Nobody seems to feel he or she can function well in the bar atmosphere. Women talked of frustrating eye contact leading nowhere, and of coarse approaches from men who seemed to think that the price of a drink bought them a bed partner for the night. Men had different complaints. One male friend put it this way: "Everybody knows what everybody else is there for," he said, "but they all pretend. Women talk to their friends as if their lives depended on it. It's hard to break into a conversation between two women, even if you know they really want you to. And even if you do manage to break into it, you then have the problem of getting the girl you're attracted to away from her friend. It's all so much work . . . " I know what he means. Everybody talks to friends, perhaps in an attempt to disassociate themselves from what they feel is (and perhaps in fact is) a demeaning scene.

Nice Dateable Folk

Parties, everyone agreed, are another matter, the difference being that at a party you are an invited, nonpaying guest. Ergo, your presence has a legitimacy that makes functioning more comfortable and free. The only trouble with parties, unless you give them yourself, is that you're dependent upon other people, not only to give them and invite you, but to turn up someone who interests you in the bargain. Relationships on the job are risky in another way, since most people have found that office entanglements can cause difficulties in their work lives.

The third step on my road to enlightenment was the realization that while I was indeed meeting potential lovers in the traditional ways, through friends and work, I was also meeting them in an odd assortment of places, like a bicycle repair shop, the aforementioned crosstown bus and my cleaners. Suddenly my antennae started registering that wherever I went there were people of the opposite gender, some of them very attractive and even (can you believe it) available. I had inadvertently stumbled upon a very well-kept secret: Not everybody of the opposite sex in New York (or Chicago or Houston or wherever) is either gay, crazy or attached. There are quite nice dateable folk actually walking around town on two legs and doing the same things in their everyday lives that I do in mine. They too have to pick up something for dinner, have their clothes cleaned, fill their prescriptions, do their laundry and ride the bus. And the unromantic but rather comforting fact is that most

are much more themselves and, therefore, much nicer at the laundromat than they are in singles' bars.

I am not, I admit, the only one to have made this discovery. Even members of the mass media are hip to it. An early episode of "The Lou Grant Show" had the crusty newspaperman meeting a lovely, suitably mature woman in his local grocery, and wound up with him carrying her parcel home for her. And Henry "Fonz" Winkler first saw his girl friend in a Los Angeles clothing store. He asked her if she liked the jacket he was trying on. She said yes, and they've been going out ever since.

For when two people are in the same place doing more or less the same thing, there is a natural camaraderie and a commonality of purpose that make the uttering of an innocent opening remark or question unthreatening to both the speaker and the hearer. It's really the natural, normal and even civilized thing to do. Both are less vulnerable because, like invited party guests, there is a legitimate reason for being, say, at the fruit and vegetable case in the A&P, a reason apart and distinct from any other. You are simply looking for a ripe cantaloupe is all, and let anyone tell you otherwise! If you get a monosyllabic, uninterested reply to a question about how one can tell a ripe cantaloupe from an unripe cantaloupe, your dignity suffers little damage. This is not the case at a singles' bar, where there is only one reason, the obvious one, for your presence, and where a rejection can inspire feelings of humiliation tantamount to its having been broadcast on the late news.

Fear of Rejection

Of course rejection, or, more accurately, the fear of rejection, can be paralyzing anywhere. It's a fear we all have to a lesser or greater degree. (In my case it's definitely greater. I can find rejection in a red light.) But there are ways you can hedge your bets. First of all, if your antennae are working you'll be sensitive to the signals coming from the object of your intended approach. Eye contact can help here. Then there are other clues. For example, carrying the A&P scenario one step further, if you notice a shopping cart filled with jars of baby food, or several gallons of milk and family-sized loaves of Tostitos Bread, you had best move on. A glance at the third finger of the left hand pushing said cart is also in order. I have one friend who looks for sirloin steaks and jars of caviar, to minimize her chances of falling in love with an out-of-work actor, something to which she nevertheless seems prone. But I think that's carrying things to an extreme.

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Don't weigh the evidence too long, however, or otherwise let opportunity pass you by because you don't feel you have anything brilliant or worthy enough to say. As one acquaintance who is adept at making friends of strangers told me: "What you say makes absolutely no difference whatsoever. You can open the conversation with near gibberish, as long as you are friendly, and if someone is predisposed to talk to you, they'll answer. And if they're not so disposed, it won't matter if your opening sally is as clever as a Neil Simon throwaway."

My own and friends' experiences have proved the point. My opening shot on the crosstown bus, for instance, was not exactly a brain teaser. I think I asked if we had passed Eighth Avenue yet. My friend Joel, who tells me he has been very successful at making the acquaintance of women at coffee-shop lunch counters, says he starts out with innocuous remarks about the food or the service. He can tell a woman is responsive to his attentions if she enlarges upon his remark, bringing in another subject or some information about her life, like the fact that she eats in that particular coffee shop because it's very close to her office. Airport lounges, too, are Joel's specialty, and he is delighted when planes are grounded by fog, provided he isn't in a hurry and there is a pretty woman waiting for the flight.

An editor friend tells me that he's especially fond of planes and trains, where he carefully chooses a seat (while trying to make the decision look unstudied) next to an attractive young woman. Sometimes he starts the conversation with an obvious, noncommittal question like, "Are you going all the way to Croton Falls?" Or he may wait until he feels like ordering some coffee or a drink, at which point he will ask his seat partner whether she too would like anything. These are friendly, unthreatening approaches. Wit, however, can sometimes—not always, but sometimes—be disconcerting. Once I was approached by a friendly but perplexed man at my local supermarket. He asked me what kind of meat he should buy for Stroganoff. "That depends," I answered, deadpan. "Is Stroganoff a friend of yours, or your dog?" He hurried away to the lamb chops, and that, I'm afraid, was that.

Men have told me they've met women while both were jogging, and it's easy to understand why. Women tend to believe, rightly or wrongly, that a man doing something so healthy is unlikely to be a sex maniac into the bargain. And there's no getting around the fact that when it comes to approaching a stranger of

the opposite sex, women do have to be more careful than men, for the simple reason that men are usually stronger than women and might want to hurt them. For instance, I find it a good idea to stick to public meeting places until I know enough about a man to feel safe with him.

Ironically, all this gives women the edge, insofar as there is any double standard when it comes to chance encounters. Men are less defensive and therefore easier to approach than women. They, unlike women, haven't grown up with the refrain, "Don't talk to strangers," playing constantly in the background like Muzak. While some men are disconcerted by my temerity, others are happily surprised that I've taken the initiative and lifted from them the onus of making the first move.

I'm not suggesting with all this advice that you turn your life into a

constant search for romance. That would be like spending the whole year at a singles' resort. I'm simply suggesting a change in outlook, an opening up to the life going on around you every day. Meeting people in the places you go rather than going places to meet people may seem like a fine distinction, but it's not. It's the difference between doing things because you really want to do them and doing things because of some hoped-for result. And people who please themselves—whether they're in the corner delicatessen or the jungles of Guatemala—are pleasing to other people. In fact, they just may be irresistible.

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