

Dates & Don'ts

An Exploration of Dating
in Modern Times

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Aniela Vogel





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Foreword

When 2021 unraveled, I found myself in a very stable place: happy in my career and happy with my personal life after a series of (largely positive) life-altering events. Many of my friends were launching businesses, enrolling in a Master's program, or starting a family. With lots of free time and a desire to spend it in a meaningful way, I was hungry for a project of my own. The pandemic provided an opportunity for me to finally follow the advice of my closest friends and write a book about my dating experience after getting out of a twelve-year relationship. Thanks to the lockdowns, my time on Tinder wasn't very long, but, oh, I did get to meet a lot of *interesting* people.

Writing this book gave me an incredible chance to reconnect with myself and reflect. Writing down my own experiences and using stories my friends shared as inspiration was not particularly hard—the challenging part was imbuing each experience with meaning. I had to dissect my dates into moments, identify the decisions and pivotal points, ask myself why I did something, and try to uncover someone's motivation for acting a certain way. It was a process that I truly loved and would do all over again—and probably will, as my thirst for writing has only grown since I started this project.

I'm publishing this novel by my own means, not with a publishing house. Still, I'm truly proud of this accomplishment. As a child, I dreamed of becoming a writer, a journalist actually, but I gave up on it as I moved to Switzerland and realized it would take a lifetime to master German—*and learn to love it.*

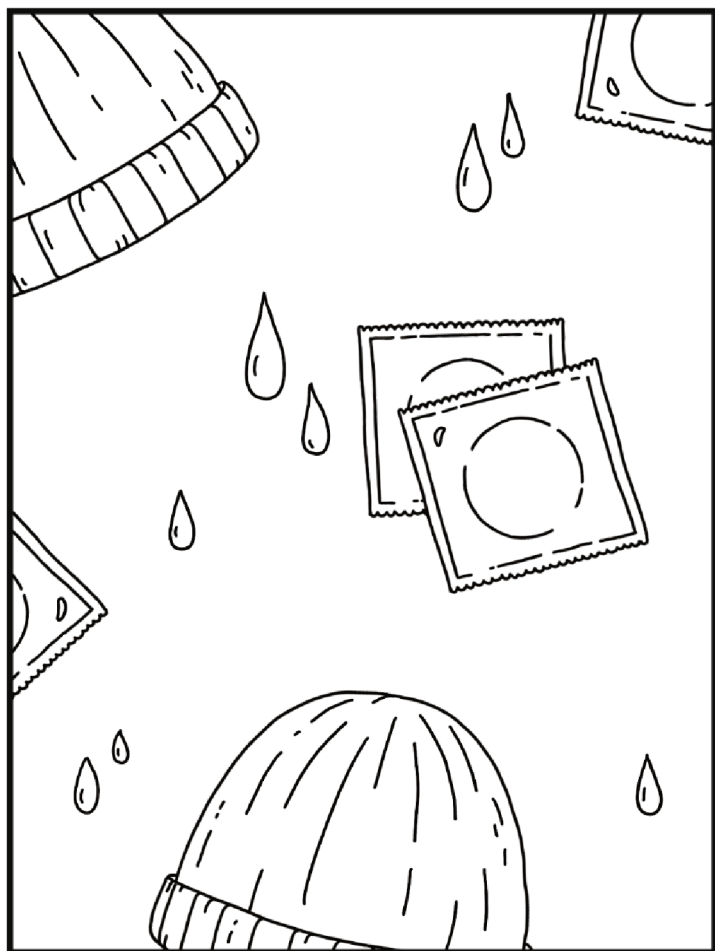
For many years, I wondered if I should've fought to keep writing, even if just for myself. However, somehow, life took over. Between work, university, building a social circle, and enjoying all the cultural activities in Switzerland, I just didn't write. So when Covid forced us collectively to slow down and turn inwards, I seized the opportunity to write, and I'll continue to do so now that I know how much energy and pleasure it gives me. Fourteen-year-old me would be proud. I'm not sure whether she would've

imagined a collection of dating stories as a choice for our opera prima, but here we are.

And that's precisely the point of this book. I'm speaking to you, a twenty or thirty-something woman, single or in a relationship, but looking to build a meaningful connection with someone. I'd like the experiences I share to offer you space for reflection: to encourage you to think about what you want, like, and need without focusing on how others might perceive you. I'm here to support you in rejecting the outrageous, outdated rules our heteronormative society imposes on women and men. It's time to acknowledge how special you are and dare to take and do whatever you please. Dare to try new things, get out of your comfort zone, and give others a chance. But, most importantly, give yourself credit for being brave, authentic, and outspoken.

A note on the contents of this novel, I discuss a few uncomfortable and intimate topics in the book, some in more detail than certain readers may feel comfortable with. All of the stories are based on actual events, but I have allowed myself to add a dash of pepper here and glitter there to keep things interesting. My intention is not to shock. I hope that by sharing tricky, embarrassing bits of my dating experience, we will discover common ground. I bet that some of the situations resonate with you. Maybe you or your friends have had similar experiences. I hope you nod in complicity or giggle when a passage sparks a memory of your own. I hope you enjoy this little part of me that I've enjoyed putting into words.

Premieres, Perspiration, Perseverance & Protection



It's been a spectacular summer in Zurich, with endless sunshine and sunsets the color of cotton candy. I just moved in with my friend Bo for a few weeks while I look for a permanent place to stay. At Bo's, I'm surrounded by the smell of fresh flowers, posters with positive quotes, and general femininity. Even better, I have a friend to drink a cup of tea with and watch local starlets eat a live tarantula on TV while their teammates watch them with eyes wide open, wanting them to give up and cry as much as we do.

I love the city I call home, but I'm ecstatic when my friend Liz invites me to spend a weekend in Nuremberg with her and her charming fiancé, Eric. I've known her for over a decade, since our first day of high school in Mexico. Even before one of my best friends introduced us, I was familiar with her boisterous laugh, like most of the other 90s students in our class. I can still hear it echoing through the halls of our school.

Truthfully, her invitation to spend a weekend in Nuremberg doesn't come as a surprise; after all, it's only been two months since *the breakup* — and she probably doesn't fully believe my affirmations over Facetime that I *really* am feeling good and enjoying life. I am doing just fine, except for the occasional pang of guilt for how well I'm handling things.

Liz wants to check on me, distract me and make sure I'm as happy with my current life situation as I claim. I bet she's even stocked up on chocolate ice cream and tissues just in case I crumble under her inquisitive, Mexican "*are-you-really-okay?*" gaze. But no, not me — I've got all my life to live, and I've got all my love to give, and I'm singing along with Gloria Gaynor on this one.

The circumstances of my breakup were radically different from Gloria's. You could say Alex and I just drifted apart

little by little over the 12 years we were together. Toward the end, we were basically roommates sharing an apartment. Alex was never a particularly passionate or romantic person. At first, I found his candor and assertiveness refreshing. I was craving a contrast to the outdated concept of *telenovela* love I was exposed to in Mexico. The kind that often portrays women as either beautiful, humble, and devoted (the protagonist) or beautiful but treacherous and jealous (the antagonist). Instead, I yearned for a relationship between two equals who love one another, enjoy freedom in a relationship, and don't idolize each other.

In the beginning, it was great, but unfortunately, all that freedom created a lot of space between us. Over time, our romantic love gave way to a strong friendship. The stronger our friendship, the less expressive and tactile we became, and the more we took each other for granted. Lengthy dinners and conversations about our goals were replaced by routine Netflix and Chill evenings; hugs and *maybe tomorrows* substituted real intimacy. We were with each other all the time, but somehow rarely together.

It wasn't one dramatic event that led to our breakup. In the end, it was the many little things that I tried to see as trivial but, in truth, were important to me. Like the way he never asked to hold hands or how when I interlaced my fingers with his, he'd squeeze them for the briefest moment and then let go. I adapted to what he preferred so many times. I'd tell myself that we didn't have to hold hands, or go to dinner with my friends, that it was okay to go skiing even though it terrified me.

Sound familiar? Like many humans in love, I accommodated my partner's wishes without protest, without bargaining. At first, because I loved him, and then at some point out of habit to keep the peace. One day I finally realized I'd compromised a lot more than he had. I grew tired of putting aside my goals and desires to suit his. He never coerced me, though. I did it willingly. I thought compromise was the key

to a happy relationship—and I still believe it is, but only when both partners give in even measure. But after over a decade together, I realized there was so much I wanted to do differently in my life. Despite Alex's best efforts to stop me from abandoning what he saw as our joint lifeboat, it was clear that parting ways was the only option.

So I ended our relationship without giving him what he considered a valid reason. I told him I wanted to "find myself" borrowing a line out of a 90s romantic comedy. I needed time alone to prioritize self-care and find out who I truly was: to become one whole person again instead of someone's "better half" (I've always hated that expression anyway. It implies we're incomplete if we're single—what nonsense.). And is rediscovering oneself not a good enough reason to do anything in life, really?

Our breakup was relatively peaceful and grown-up. It came after a brief period of quarreling and blaming each other, something that was unusual for us. There wasn't a trail of broken china or doors slammed in each other's faces, but that didn't mean the decision to move out was easy. It wasn't hard to lug the few boxes and bags with my belongings out of our home, but it was difficult to watch Alex stay. It pains me to think that he's constantly faced with reminders of our life together. I get to move on—literally, while he invariably opens his eyes every day to the apartment we furnished, lived in, and even built together.

Even though he was gracious to include me in the planning and construction of the apartment, I'm thankful I left most of the big decisions to him: the color of the bathroom tiles, the position of the power outlets, and the finishing on the toilet paper holders. He was thirty-three and enjoyed the excitement of building a property. I was twenty-three-year-old and doing an exchange year in Madrid; the last thing I wanted to think about was how a glorified ass-paper holder was going to set us back 80 francs—and we needed two of them. That was my weekly party budget!

So, now, I want to show Liz that I'm okay. All I can think of on the train to Nuremberg is whether she'll be commiserating with me. Scratch that thought: even before I exit the train, I spot her waving her arms enthusiastically and screaming, "wooooh!" I laugh and utter a "*wooh*" to myself, louder than expected, and a few fellow passengers turn in my direction. I shrug and point at Liz, whose face is beaming with a big smile. It's amazing how seeing a long-time friend can have the same invigorating effect as a shot of espresso.

On the platform, it's already apparent that the city is busier than usual, even if it's only 11 a.m. I picked this weekend to visit Liz and Eric because of the Bardentreffen, a three-day music festival that attracts people from all over the region. Ironically, they have tickets for another concert in Munich tonight. So after a quick tour of their apartment, they head off for the 4-hour long drive.

From the window, I watch their car move like a ladybug ambling down the serpentine road until they turn the corner past the Frauentor, one of the city's four emblematic gate towers. The streets and buildings shimmer as if bathed in gold. The air is hot, and a cool breeze blows fresh air, heavy with a rumor of chords and percussion. If a city could smile, this would be it.

Well, I'll have to explore the city on my own. A fun prospect—or would some company be more exciting? I might try my luck with a dating app. I'll be honest, I set up my Tinder profile about a week ago but more as an initiation into single life than out of a genuine interest in kick-starting my dating life. But tonight, I think I'm ready to tread the treacherous waters of the Tinder Swamp to meet new people. It's got to be more fun to explore an unfamiliar town with someone new. I wonder if I should think of ways to gracefully flee if I end up on a terrible date like the ones my single friends have told me about.

But you want to know what is *really* terrible? My sense of direction, to the point that I'll choose *Google Maps* over human company on a trip if I have to. Good thing I have three gigs of data to help me escape in case I run into an alligator lurking in the singles swamp. Most likely, though, I'll match with a tadpole or frog just looking for a good time. In other places in the world, like Mexico, my home for the first 18 years of my life, exploring a city alone would be more difficult. In less secure cities, you always have to be vigilant, treat your wallet as an appendage, and question every random act of kindness, which might be neither random nor kind.

Not in Nuremberg and especially not in Switzerland. The fact that I can walk through a city alone at night gives me a delightfully rare sense of freedom, considering that so many women across the globe feel unsafe walking home after dark. It's one more damn privilege living here affords on an awfully long list—and it's one I especially cherish. That and drinking fresh water from the tap still makes my heart swell with gratitude even after 14 years of living in Europe.

Picking up my phone, I hold my breath, realizing that it's been 12 years since my last *first* date. Back then, I was a teenager with a love for Long Island ice tea and low-cut tops. Flirting has never been my strong suit, but it was easier in those circumstances, which I'm not interested in replicating today. Nor do I want to—my goal is simply to meet people, get out of my comfort zone, and learn from every experience. That way, when I'm ready for a relationship in the future, I'll have a better idea of what I want and what I don't.

I open Tinder, encouraged by the notion that I'm just here to get to know the locals and have a bit of harmless fun, like 90 percent of the other users on the app. I hit the button in the middle and start swiping away. It's not long before I hear a celebratory *ding*—my first international match.

A balloon carrying my heart soars from my chest towards the sky, but my brain abruptly yanks it back into my ribcage. This is my first match and, as we all know, if I end up

meeting them in person, it's most likely to be a dreadful date. The prospect of a good first date is one in twelve, according to an entirely subjective analysis of my single friends' stories. So, sure, by all means, Adem, I'll talk to you, but I'm going to keep it casual.

Adem, with dark curls down to his chin, swiped right on me too. According to his profile, he's a product developer at Adidas. Somehow, the fact that he gave me such a quick like gives me a sense of empowerment. I can say anything, do anything—he already likes the way I look. *Ah, the sweet taste of instant gratification.*

It's lunchtime, so asking him to grab a bite to eat feels like a good opening. So I type, "Hi! Are you hungry? I'm starving, and my friends said the kebab place at the main square is a must. Wanna join me for a bite?" I see three dots fade and then reappear, indicating that he's typing. My heart beats fast with anticipation.

He agrees with a simple "Hi! That sounds like a good idea," and a half an hour later, we're nose-deep in flatbread filled with meat, lettuce, and heaps of raw onion. I was planning to ask for mine without onion, but I didn't want to seem like one of *those* people, and Adem ordered "with everything," which is always a good sign. I love onion and garlic, and if there's a chance I'll taste someone's acrid breath, I'm going to indulge as well.

We look for a free spot among the endless rows of biergarten-style folding tables and benches set up for the Bardentreffen music festival. When a couple sitting a few steps from us makes a move to leave, we quickly grab their spots on the end of a table that's definitely seen a few festivals in its lifetime. And they're great seats, perfect for people watching. I'm particularly grateful for the umbrella shielding us from the searing sun.

Market Square is bustling with life. The main stage for the Bardentreffen is at the far end, in front of the ornate, imposing Church of Our Lady. Then there's a large open area for

dancing, and on our end, there's a variety of food stands and trucks selling all kinds of carb-heavy specialties, from *lahmacun* to *kottu roti* to pretzels. Best served with a cold Franconian beer, of course.

It's hard to hear Adem speak over the hubbub around us, but we still manage to strike up a conversation between bites of kebab. Things are moving quickly, and it seems like a good sign. So far, he's been honest and accommodating: I said I was hungry, and now we're eating. We're chatting away, making each other laugh. It's shaping up to be a good date, or at least it hasn't been terrible so far. Maybe I'll be the one to break the disheartening statistic.

All the first-date tension is gone. You're in a good spot when you're with someone and feel okay that Ali's secret sauce is dripping down your wrists onto the pavement. I eat my kebab three times slower than usual. We're being real here, but I like this guy so far and don't want to scare him off too soon.

Adem has spent the past 20 minutes telling me about a new shoe sole his team is developing out of recycled plastic, and I'm genuinely interested. Who knew there was so much technology in shoe soles! Adem sure enjoys what he does — and talking about it. I can relate to that; I could tell you all about the board-on-frame technology that furniture retailers use and how it helps save wood (but don't worry, I won't). It's good to know that I have enough potential first-date stories in case I ever need them.

His lively brown eyes and his warm, easy laugh feel pleasantly familiar; we seem to have a lot in common. There hasn't been a single awkward silence in the past hour. Tinder dating isn't so bad after all. Maybe it has to do with the nature of our date: we know it's a one-hit-wonder or a one-time-blunder, but in any case, we'll never see each other again. It really does take a lot of the pressure off.

We walk aimlessly through streets teeming with locals and tourists alike, mostly buying gingerbread and beer, both

specialties from Nuremberg. The old town is truly picturesque, with its colorful, postcard-worthy half-timbered houses, charming little bridges, and medieval-looking squares. After wandering for a while, we end up in what seems to be the hottest biergarten in town. All the tables are full, so people have taken to sitting on the ground. We find a free spot and sit on the ground, carefully balancing our pints of lager. Normally, I wouldn't order a liter of beer, and doing it with this heat seems even sillier.

The sun scorches the crowns of our heads, beating down on the cobblestone square and the thousands of bare ankles sporting Stan Smiths. The pavement burns my thighs through the thin fabric of my black dress. I need to finish my beer before it starts to boil. Adem just finished his and is telling me about his large vodka collection and his penchant for shots. I have nothing against spirit connoisseurs, but there are only so many "crazy night" stories a girl can handle. Honey, at this age, we all have a few of those stories. He offers to buy a second round since I paid for the first one and readily jumps off the ground toward the bar.

When he returns with the second round of beers, he begins smooth-talking. He's no James Bond, but I flush, noticing the many strangers sitting around us eavesdropping on what they can clearly tell is our first date. I wish they'd strike up a conversation of their own. "Did I already tell you I really like your dress?" he says as he rests his palm on my waist, making the fabric of my dress stick to my sweaty back.

"Thank you, it's one of my favorites," I reply with a smile, aware of the few faces around us that have turned to admire my dress. I want to say, "it's a Hennes & Mauritz 2017. Organic cotton, of course."

Being within earshot of all these strangers while we talk about our hobbies and achievements as we ramp up the mating dance makes me increasingly uncomfortable.

I'm being observed every time I return his compliments or laugh at his remarks. When he suggests we go to

his apartment, coincidentally around the corner, I accept, knowing where this will likely lead. Adem is fun and charming, and his long curls have been tempting me all afternoon.

As soon as we enter his apartment in the old town, I'm hit with the smell of expensive wood and pine-scented cleaner. If the ceilings were lower, I would've sworn we were inside a yacht. There are statues of female torsos, sculptures of various sizes, and a sofa with tiny decorative cushions in nautical colors that seem to have never moved.

I'm scared to touch anything in case I leave fingerprints on the many polished, shiny surfaces around me. He leads me to the upper floor, where there's only a walk-in closet with a fully stocked bar and two stools: what an odd choice to set up the bar here between tweed jackets and chinos when the sofas downstairs could accommodate a dozen people comfortably.

"Gin and Tonic?" he asks eagerly, pulling two glasses from a cabinet perched between belts and ties that must belong to his roommate (none of these clothes seem to fit the style of a sneaker sole developer). I nod in agreement, happy that I didn't finish my second pint and for the chance to exchange the smell of kebab and beer with that of cucumber and tonic water.

Adem retrieves ice cubes from underneath the bar, sliced cucumber from the fridge, and adds a dash of pepper. I wonder how many soirées he and his roommate have hosted in this closet slash bar. The suits and shirts adorning the walls give off a *seven-minutes-in-heaven* vibe. There's even a shiny black blazer that could belong to a magician. Just as I'm about to point this out, Adem moves toward me, places both glasses on the counter, and kisses me. I like the taste of his full lips, his curls tickling my cheeks.

For a moment, I wonder: what exactly have I agreed to by coming to his house? Is there such a thing as Tinder etiquette or a glossary of terms? Is "*I'm looking for fun*" code for "*let's engage in one-time sexual intercourse and never contact each other*"

again?" And is "let's go to yours" an unwritten promise of sex? I'll have to ask my friends about it.

But so far, I'm enjoying where things are going, and I did accept Adem's invitation with the assumption that we'd make out or more. And I've just learned that I like curly hair and full lips and want to see where this lesson is going.

About a fourth into our G&Ts, he suggests we move to his bedroom on the ground floor, where the makeout sesh continues amid copious amounts of sweat. I ask myself again: *Is this how first dates usually transpire?* I wasn't expecting to go from döner to doing it so quickly, but I'm having fun, so why not go with the (quite literal) flow? Slippery palms, salty kisses, knees that give, and condoms that must be replaced every so often because they're struggling to stick to wet skin.

Luckily, Adem has a full drawer in his closet that contains nothing but condoms in every color and brand imaginable. He even lets me choose them, the gentleman he is. This means he's a player and actually needs this insane amount of rubbers, or he's been collecting them all his life hoping he'll get to use them one day – like some of us who keep that two-sizes-too-small pair of pants because we intend to fit into them next summer. That's why I check the expiration date, just in case.

This might not be the kind of flawless lovemaking that you see in Hollywood, but it's serving realness. Adem doesn't seem to appreciate the imperfections—he giggles, apologizes awkwardly, huffs, and occasionally averts my gaze. I bet he wouldn't be this ashamed if he hadn't been exposed to all those perfume commercials that suggest he has to stay dry at all times, smell like the ocean, and have massive biceps to impress the ladies. I tell him it's alright, *for reals*, and although it makes things a bit sloppy, sweat is nothing more than saltwater. Rather than wiping it away, he should shake off his insecurity. He doesn't and just continues to ask me if I'm enjoying myself. Maybe it's to distract from the fact that he clearly isn't.