

CHAPTER 4

# CHOICE AND OPTIONS

**M**y parents had an arranged marriage. This always fascinated me. I am perpetually indecisive on even the most mundane decisions, and I couldn't imagine leaving such an important choice to other people. I asked my dad to describe his experience to me.

This was his process.

He told his parents he was ready to get married, so his family arranged meetings with three neighboring families. The first girl, he said, was a "little too tall," and the second girl was a "little too short." Then he met my mom. After he quickly deduced that she was the ap-

propriate height (finally!), they talked for about thirty minutes. They decided it would work. A week later, they were married.

And they still are, thirty-five years later. Happily so—and probably more so than most older white people I know who had nonarranged marriages.

So that's how my dad decided on whom he was going to spend the rest of his life with. Meeting a few people, analyzing their height, and deciding on one after talking to her for thirty minutes.

It was like he went on that MTV dating show *Next* and married my mom.

Let's look at how I do things, maybe with a slightly less important decision. How about the time I had to pick where to eat dinner in Seattle when I was on tour in the spring of 2014?

First I texted four friends who travel and eat out a lot and whose judgment on food I really trust. While I waited for recommendations from them, I checked the website Eater for its "Heat Map," which includes new, tasty restaurants in the city. I also checked the "Eater 38," which is the site's list of the thirty-eight essential Seattle restaurants and standbys. Then I checked reviews on Yelp to see what the consensus was on there. I also checked an online guide to Seattle in *GQ* magazine. I narrowed down my search after consulting all these recommendations and then went on the restaurant websites to check out the menus.

At this point I filtered all these options down by tastiness, distance, and what my tum-tum told me it wanted to eat.

Finally, after much deliberation, I made my selection: Il Corvo. A delicious Italian place that sounded amazing. Fresh-made pasta. They only did three different types a day. I was very excited.

Unfortunately, it was closed. It only served lunch.

By now I had run out of time because I had a show to do, so I ended up making a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich on the bus.\*

This kind of rigor goes into a lot of my decision making. Whether it's where I'm eating, where I'm traveling, or, god forbid,

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\* **NOTE:** The next day I had Il Corvo for lunch and it was very delicious.

something I'm buying, I feel compelled to do a lot of research to make sure I'm getting *the best*.

**At certain times, though, this “I need the best” mentality can be debilitating.** I wish I could just eat somewhere that looks good and be happy with my choice. But I can't. The problem is that I know somewhere there is a perfect meal for me and I have to do however much research I can to find it.

That's the thing about the Internet: It doesn't simply help us find the best thing out there; it has helped to produce the idea that there *is* a best thing and, if we search hard enough, we can find it. And in turn there are a whole bunch of inferior things that we'd be foolish to choose.

Here's a quick list of things I can think of that I've spent at least five to ten minutes researching:

- \* Electric citrus juicer (Waiting on this one to arrive in the mail. Hope I didn't fuck it up. Don't want too much pulp in my juice!)
- \* Taxidermy (I started off looking for a deer or bear, but I ended up finding a beautiful penguin in Paris. His name is Winston.)
- \* Which prestigious TV drama to binge-watch next (*The Americans*, *House of Cards*, or *Orphan Black*? The answer: I watched all of them while telling my publisher I was writing this book.)
- \* Bag for my laptop
- \* Protective case for my laptop
- \* Internet-blocking program so I can stop using my laptop so much
- \* Museums (Gotta peep the exhibits online before I commit to driving all the way out there, right?)
- \* Coasters (If you dig deep, you can find some dope coasters with dinosaurs on them!)

- \* Vanilla ice cream (Had to step it up from Breyers, and there's a *lot* of debate in the ice cream fan community—there are fierce debates on those message boards.)

It's not just me, though. I may take things to extremes sometimes, but we live in a culture that tells us we want and deserve the best, and now we have the technology to get it. Think about the overwhelming popularity of websites that are dedicated to our pursuit of the best things available. Yelp for restaurants. TripAdvisor for travel. Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic for movies.

A few decades ago, if I wanted to research vanilla ice cream, what would I have even done? Cold-approach chubby guys and then slowly steer the convo toward ice cream to get their take? No, thanks.

Nowadays the Internet is my chubby friend. It is the whole world's chubby friend.

## THE “BEST” ROMANTIC PARTNER?

**If this mentality has so pervaded our decision making, then it stands to reason that it is also affecting our search for a romantic partner, especially if it's going to be long-term.** In a sense, it already has. Remember: We are no longer the generation of the “good enough” marriage. We are now looking for our soul mates. And even after we find our soul mates, if we start feeling unhappy, we get divorced.

If you are looking for your soul mate, now is the time to do it. Consider the rich social infrastructure of bars, nightclubs, and restaurants in cities. Add to that the massive online dating industry. Then throw in the fact that people now get married later in life than ever before and spend their twenties in “early adulthood,” which is basically dedicated to exploring romantic options and having experiences that previous generations couldn't have imagined.

College, finding our careers, moving out on our own to different cities and parts of the world—in early adulthood we are constantly being introduced to new and exciting pools of romantic options.

Even the advances in the past few years are pretty absurd. You can stand in line at the grocery store and swipe sixty people's faces on Tinder while you wait to buy hamburger buns. That's twenty times more people than my dad met on his marriage journey. (Note: For those wondering, the *best* hamburger buns are Martin's Potato Rolls. Trust me!)

**When you think about all this, you have to acknowledge something profound about the current situation:** In the history of our species, no group has ever had as many romantic options as we have now.

So, in theory, this should be a great thing. More options is better, right?

Well. It's not that easy.

Barry Schwartz is a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College who has spent much of his career studying the annoying problems that come from having an abundance of options.

Schwartz's research, and a considerable amount of scholarship from other social scientists too, shows that when we have more options, we are actually less satisfied and sometimes even have a harder time making a choice at all.

When I thought back to that sad peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich I had in Seattle, this idea resonated with me.

Schwartz's way of thinking about choice grew popular when he published his book *The Paradox of Choice*. But for decades most people presumed the opposite: The more choices we had, the more likely we would be able to maximize our happiness.

In the 1950s the pioneering scholar Herbert Simon paved the way for people like Schwartz by showing that most of the time people are not all that interested in getting the best possible option. Generally, Simon argued, people and organizations lack the

time, knowledge, and inclination to seek out “the best” and are surprisingly content with a suboptimal outcome. Maximizing is just too difficult, so we wind up being “satisficers” (a term that combines “satisfy” and “suffice”). We may fantasize about having the best of something, but usually we are happy to have something that’s “good enough.”

According to Simon, people can be maximizers and satisficers in different contexts. For example, when it comes to, let’s say, tacos, I’m a maximizer. I’ll do a rigorous amount of research to make sure I’m getting the best taco I can find, because for me there is a huge difference in the taco experience. A satisficer will just get tacos wherever they see a decent taco stand and call it a day. I hate getting tacos with these people. Enjoy your nasty tacos, losers.

If I’m picking gasoline for my car, though, I’m more of a satisficer. I drive into whatever gas station is close, load the cheapest shit I can to fill my tank, and get the fuck out of there. It sounds pretty mean to my car, but I really don’t give a shit and notice no difference in performance for the quality of gas. Sorry, Prius.

Now, I understand that there is a certain kind of “car guy” out there who would find my choice of gasoline as horrifying as I find the choice of suboptimal tacos. To that I say: Stop caring so much about gasoline, you ding-dong! Spend that money on good tacos like a nice, normal person.

What Schwartz suggests, however, is that cultural, economic, and technological changes since the time that Simon wrote have changed the choice-making context. Because of smartphones and the Internet, our options are no longer limited to what’s in the physical store where we are standing. We can choose from what’s in *every* store, everywhere. We have far more opportunities to become maximizers than we would have had just a few decades ago. And that new context is changing who we are and how we live.

I noticed this in myself with Christmas ornaments. Why would I be anything but a satisficer with Christmas ornaments? It’s pretty standard. The balls, the string of lights, etc. Well, do

some Internet searching and you find some amazing ornaments. A *Back to the Future* DeLorean, little dinosaurs (!), a funny dude on a motorcycle. I ordered them all!

These types of ornaments wouldn't have even entered my mind before the Internet allowed me to see these other options. Now my standards for Christmas ornaments had gone up, and I wanted the best. Sadly, due to shipping delays, most of the ornaments I ordered arrived in late January, but my tree was extra dope in February.

Besides gasoline, it's damn near impossible for me to think of anything where I won't put in time to find the best. I'm a maximizer in nearly everything. Bottled water? Yup. You buy one of the bozo brands and you get bottled water that's just tap water in a bottle. Potato chips? Ruffles? No, thank you. Pass the Sweet Onion Kettle Chips. Candles? If you only knew how good the candles in my house smell.

It's so easy to find and get the best, so why not?

### **What happens to people who look for and find the best?**

Well, it's bad news again. Schwartz, along with two business school professors, did a study of college seniors preparing to enter the workforce.<sup>1</sup> For six months the researchers followed the seniors as they applied for and started new jobs. They then classified the students into maximizers (students who were looking for the best job) and satisficers (students who were looking for a job that met certain minimum requirements and was "good enough").

Here's what they found: On average, the maximizers put much more time and effort into their job search. They did more research, asked more friends for advice, and went on more interviews. In return, the maximizers in the study got better jobs. They received, on average, a 20 percent higher starting salary than the satisficers.

After they started their jobs, though, Schwartz and his colleagues asked the participants how satisfied they were. What they found was amazing. Even though the maximizers had better jobs

than the satisficers, by every psychological measure they felt *worse* about them. Overall, maximizers had less job satisfaction and were less certain they'd selected the right job at all. The satisficers, by contrast, were generally more positive about their jobs, the search process, and their lives in general.

The satisficers had jobs that paid less money, but they somehow felt better about them.

Searching for a job when you're in college is hardly a typical situation, so I asked Schwartz if perhaps this study was just capturing something unique. It wasn't.

Schwartz is an encyclopedia of psychological research on choice problems. If asked to give a quote about him for the back of a book cover, I would say, "This motherfucker knows choice."

As he explained it, the maximizers in the job-search experiment were doing what maximizers generally do: Rather than compare actual jobs, with their various pros and cons, in their minds they wound up selecting the features of each particular job and creating a "fantasy job," an ideal that neither they nor, probably, anyone else would ever get.

Johnny Satisficer is sitting around at his dum-dum job, eating his disgusting subpar taco and thinking about hanging his generic Christmas ornaments later on. But he's totally happy about that.

Meanwhile, I've just found out the taco place I researched for hours is closed on Sundays, and even though this year I have my dope Christmas ornaments, I'm worried there's a better Christmas ornament out there that I don't know about yet and am spending my holidays with the Internet instead of my family.

## THE PARADOX OF CHOICE IN RELATIONSHIPS

**When applied to modern romance, the implications of these ideas on choice are slightly terrifying.**

If we are the generation with the greatest set of options, what

happens to our decision making? By Schwartz's logic, we are probably looking for "the best" and, in fact, we are looking for our soul mates too. Is this possible to find? "How many people do you need to see before you know you've found the best?" Schwartz asked. "The answer is every damn person there is. How else do you know it's the best? If you're looking for the best, this is a recipe for complete misery."

Complete misery! (Read in a scary Aziz whisper voice.)\*

If you are in a big city or on an online dating site, you are flooded with options. Seeing all these options, like the people in the job example, are we now comparing our potential partners not to other potential partners but rather to an idealized person whom no one could measure up to?

And what if you're not looking for your soul mate yet but just want to date someone and commit to a girlfriend or boyfriend? How does our increase in options affect our ability to commit? To be honest, even picking lunch in Seattle was pretty tough.

If we, like the people in the job study, are creating a "fantasy" person full of all our desired qualities, doesn't the vast potential of the Internet and all our other romantic pools give us the illusion that this fantasy person does, in fact, exist? Why settle for anything less?

When we brought these ideas up in focus groups, people responded to these notions immediately. In the city with arguably the most options, New York City, people discussed how it was hard to settle down because every corner you turned revealed more potential opportunities.

I've felt it myself. For much of the past few years, I split my time between New York and L.A. When I first started dating my current girlfriend, when I was in New York, I'd see people everywhere and feel like, *Shit, should I ever take myself out of the single world? There's so many people!* Then I got back to L.A., where instead of walking in streets and subway stations full of potential options, I would be

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\* **NOTE:** If you listen to the audiobook version of this, I'm not going to say, "Read in a scary Aziz whisper voice," or this note, because I'm just going to do the actual voice, and I think it should be pretty terrifying.

alone in my Prius filled with shitty gasoline, listening to a dumb podcast. I couldn't wait to get home and hold my girlfriend.

**But the surge of options is not limited to people in New York.** As Schwartz told me, "Where did people meet alternatives thirty years ago? It was in the workplace. How many shots did you have? Two or three people, maybe, who you found attractive, who were the right age, or you meet somebody who your friend works with, and your friend fixes you up. So the set of romantic possibilities that you actually confront is going to be pretty small.

"And that, it seems to me, is like feeding in an environment where the food is relatively scarce. You find somebody who seems simpatico. And you do as much as you can to cultivate that person because there may be a long drought after that person. That's what it used to be like. But now," he said, "in principle, the world is available to you."

The world is available to us, but that may be the problem.

The Columbia professor Sheena Iyengar, whom we've met, was one of Barry Schwartz's coauthors on the job-hunting study, and she also knows a shit ton about choice. Through a series of experiments, Iyengar has demonstrated that an excess of options can lead to indecision and paralysis. In one of her most influential studies, she and another researcher set up a table at a luxury food store and offered shoppers samples of jams.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the researchers offered six types of jam, but other times they offered twenty-four. When they offered twenty-four, people were more likely to stop in and have a taste. But, strangely, they were far less likely to actually *buy* any jam. People who stopped to taste the smaller number of jams were almost *ten times* more likely to buy jam than people who stopped to taste the larger number.

Don't you see what's happening to us? There's just too much jam out there. If you're on a date with a certain jam, you can't even focus, 'cause as soon as you go to the bathroom, three other jams have texted you. You go online, you see more jam there. You put in

filters to find the perfect jam. There are iPhone apps that literally tell you if there is jam nearby that wants to get eaten at that particular moment!

## LIMITED OPTIONS:

### JOURNEYS TO WICHITA AND MONROE

**Would forcing us to select from fewer options, as older generations did, actually make us happier?** Should we all just follow my dad's example and find someone of an ideal height and lock it down? I decided to get out of New York City and explore some places with limited options. My two stops: Monroe, New York, and Wichita, Kansas.

Monroe is about sixty miles outside of New York City. It's home to approximately eight thousand people. It's a small community where most everyone knows one another. There's nothing but strip malls and second-tier grocery chains you never see elsewhere.

If you click on the "Attractions" tab on TripAdvisor's Monroe page, it brings up a message that says, "I'm sorry, you must have clicked here by mistake. No one could possibly be planning a trip to Monroe to see its 'Attractions.' I have a feeling about why you'd want to go to Monroe. Here, let me redirect you to a suicide-prevention site."

Basically, not much is going on.

Wichita is much, much bigger than Monroe. Its population is about 385,000. A quick Google search will show you many articles saying Wichita is one of the worst dating cities in the country. Granted, there isn't any scientific merit to these surveys, but the conditions used to gain this ranking make sense. There is a low proportion of single people and strikingly few venues where single people can gather, places like bars and coffee shops. The town is quite isolated and doesn't get much traffic from nearby towns.

One thing to note about people who live in places with limited

options is that they get married young. Whereas in places like New York City and Los Angeles the average age at first marriage is now around thirty, in smaller towns and less populated states the typical age of first marriage for women is as low as twenty-three (Utah), twenty-four (Idaho and Wyoming), or twenty-five (a whole bunch of states, including Arkansas, Oklahoma, Alaska, and Kansas). Men in these states tend to marry just a year or two later than women.

Could the lack of options be forcing these people to commit earlier and get into serious relationships? Perhaps, but this doesn't always work out either. In recent decades the divorce rate in small towns and rural areas has skyrocketed, catching up to the levels commonly found in large cities.<sup>3</sup> So many of the people I met in Wichita told me about friends of theirs who'd married before the age of twenty-five and then divorced soon after. Heather, for instance, was only twenty-four, but she could already report that "a lot of my sorority pledge sisters got married and divorced within a year." Within a year. Damn.

Let's hope things don't end like that for me and the carefully researched electric juicer I just purchased.

**Before our interviews I had romanticized the dating cities with fewer options and envisioned a happier, smaller community where people really got to know one another, and instead of hopping around trying to find the best party, they all just went to their one local spot and had a good time.**

I imagined every guy had a girl next door. They grew up together. Got to know each other their whole lives and had a really deep bond. One day they just started boning and then they got married. I'm basing that on nothing, but it seems correct, right?

But talking with so many single people in Monroe and Wichita quickly demolished my fantasy that things were simpler and nicer in small towns. They generally hated their lack of options and the troubles that came with it.

Despite the difference in size, the problems of dating in Wichita and Monroe overlapped quite a bit. All our singles in both cities felt pressure to lock it down and definitely felt like outliers by being single in their late twenties. This stigma of being unmarried in your late twenties was never expressed in any of the focus groups in bigger cities.

A huge problem is that everyone already knows all of his or her options pretty well. Josh, twenty-two, said his main pool of dating options is generally limited to a set of folks that he and his friends have known since high school. "If I see a girl at a bar and I don't know her, within thirty seconds to a minute, I'll find out who that person is by just asking around," he explained. "Her life story. Who she's dated. You basically know everything about the person."

And from talking to these folks, it appears when you don't know someone already, usually the "everything" is not "Oh he/she's the best. Brilliant, hilarious, and without any baggage or complicated past to speak of. Strange you never met!" No, it's probably closer to "Oh, him? He steals tires and then sells them on eBay to buy corn chips."

In Wichita I met Miguel, who had moved from Chicago. He mourned the fact that he never met new people anymore. In Chicago he would meet all kinds of people: friends of friends, coworkers, friends of coworkers, and strangers whom he talked up in bars, in cafés, and even on public transit. In Wichita, though, Miguel said he mainly saw the few folks he worked with and spent his evenings with the same group of friends.

This cliquish mentality was reported in both Monroe and Wichita. One guy in Wichita described it like the gangs in *The Warriors*. People have their cliques and they rarely stray outside of them to meet new people. This leads to a lot of people dating their way through the same small groups, and after they've dated everyone, they're left in a bad spot. Finding new people isn't easy when no one new is coming to town.

Sometimes people think they've discovered a new person, only to discover that they share more connections than they realized. In both Monroe and Wichita we heard stories of people meeting someone they thought was a new person but then going on Facebook and seeing forty-eight mutual friends.

A girl named Heather told me that one time she met a great guy she'd never seen before and was really excited about the possibilities, only to discover that he'd once slept with a girl she totally despised. This soured the whole thing.

The girl? Actress Gwyneth Paltrow.

Not really, but can you imagine?

Soon afterward, a guy named Greg recounted a story of going out with a girl: On the date they started sharing the stories of how they'd lost their virginity. He soon figured out that the guy she'd lost her virginity to was a close friend and coworker of his.

That coworker? Football star O. J. Simpson.

Not really, but again, could you imagine? How weird would that be? To sleep with someone who lost her virginity to O. J. Simpson?! WEIRD!

"It's like a cesspool," said Michelle, a twenty-six-year-old from Monroe. "Everybody has slept with each other."

Also, when you're going out with people in such a limited pool of options, issues I'd never thought of came up.

One: When you go out on a date, you will run into everyone you know, so sometimes singles travel for a little privacy. "I went on a date last night, but it was in a totally different town," a twenty-one-year-old Monroe resident named Emily told us. "I would never go on a first date somewhere in my town because I know all the waiters. I know all the bartenders. I know everybody."

Two: You lose the initial discovery period of getting to know someone because you are so connected and familiar already. This can be an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is you get to prescreen everyone through friends of friends, but the downside is that you lose that fun of getting to know someone. In Monroe, Emily reported, "You already know their life story, so you

don't even have to go on a first date. You have already prejudged them before you've even gone out."

And finally, if you do go out with someone and it goes badly, you have to deal with the fact that you're going to see that person all the time. Compare this with a place like Los Angeles, where Ryan, twenty-three, said that he could go out with someone and, if it went badly, be fairly confident he would never see them again. "It was almost like they were dead. Like, in a way, you murdered them in your mind," he said. Damn, Ryan, let's chill on the mind murders! But I understand his sentiment.

What about expanding the pool of options with the Internet and other social media? Were any of these singles using online dating? Smartphone swipe apps?

In Wichita people were shier about online dating. There was still a stigma, and with such a small pool there was a worry that people would see your profile and judge you.

Josh, from Monroe, decided to give Tinder a try: "I set [the range] for ten miles at first because I want to make this quick. Two people pop up, and I'm like, no [he swiped his finger to the left], no [he swiped again], and then . . . it was done. And I was like, *Damn, I thought there'd be more. Can I get those back?*"

Others had more luck. Margaret, one of the few Wichita singles who had tried online dating, said, "I think that the online dating thing, what I'm finding is that there's so much choice, I'm like, *Oh my god. All these guys could be great.*"

Another dater also tried Tinder. "I started in Wichita but ran out of people after just a week or so. I then went to Pennsylvania, near Penn State University, for a few days and decided to test it out there. I felt like I could swipe through people for years. This just showed me how limited options were in Kansas."

Of course, not everyone was disappointed by the lack of options in these small towns.

One gentleman in the Monroe group, Jimmy, age twenty-four, had a more positive attitude. Whenever someone expressed frustration with the lack of options in the dating scene, Jimmy would

insist that you simply needed to invest time in people to really get to know them.

“If you’re patient and you know what you like, you’ll find what you like in another person. There’s going to be things you don’t like about them. They don’t clip their toenails. They don’t wash their socks.”

I told Jimmy I felt like he could find someone with clean socks and trimmed toenails, and maybe the bar was set a bit too low.

“The point is there’s always going to be something that bothers you, you know? But it’s up to you,” he said.

This positive attitude was echoed in Wichita as well. “I feel optimistic about Wichita,” said Greg, twenty-six. “I know that there’s people here that would surprise me. You have to put a little bit more effort into the relationship. But it’s still there somewhere.”

“I agree,” said James, twenty-four. “There’s still gold here. You just have to look hard enough.”

It was a beautiful thing to hear. The attitude of these guys was to give people a chance. Instead of sampling a bunch of jams, they had learned how to focus on one jam and make sure they could appreciate it before they walked away.

The more I thought about that approach to dating, the more appealing it became. No matter how many options we have, the real challenge is figuring out how to evaluate them.

After my conversations in Monroe and Wichita, I thought about how popular online dating is in New York City and L.A., how almost everyone in all the focus groups there used the sites, and the stories like the woman who was Tindering on her way to a date to try to find a better date afterward.

Maybe we are turning into the people from the job study, trying to find a crazy, unattainable job.

Maybe we are trying to meet every single person in order to be sure we have the best.

Maybe we have it all wrong.

Maybe we need to have a little more faith in humanity, like our positive buds in Wichita and Monroe.

**Look at my dad: He had an arranged marriage and he seems totally happy.** I looked into it and this is not uncommon. People in arranged marriages start off lukewarm, but over time they really invest in each other and in general have more successful relationships. They are more invested in the deep commitment to the relationship, rather than being personally invested in finding a soul mate, which can tend to lead to the “Is there something better out there for me?” mentality.

## ANALYZING OUR OPTIONS

**Even before deciding to go on a date, our ways of analyzing our options are getting brutal.** As a woman in L.A. told me about the flood of options she saw as an online dater, “It’s fun, but it also opens up this door to be more and more and more picky and analytical. I was exchanging messages with a guy, and he mentioned that he listens to *Kevin & Bean* in the morning. And it was like, okay, you’re done.”

One radio-show choice had killed any chance of this relationship prospering. Somewhere that guy is sitting alone in his car listening to *Kevin & Bean*, staring at his last conversation with this woman and wondering, *Where did it all go wrong?*

Of course, these kinds of deal breakers end up making their way into the picture even if a contender does make it to a first date. “One of the problems with the first date is that you know very little about a person, so you overweight those few things that you do know,” the anthropologist and dating guru Helen Fisher told me. “And suddenly you see they’ve got brown shoes, and you don’t like brown shoes, so they’re out. Or they don’t like your haircut, so they’re out. But if you were to get to know each other more, those particular characteristics might begin to recede in importance, as you also found they had a great sense of humor or they’d love to go fishing in the Caribbean with you.”

# OUR BORING-ASS DATES

**How do we go about analyzing our options?** On dates. And most of the time, boring-ass dates. You have coffee, drinks, a meal, go see a movie. We're all trying to find someone who excites us, someone who makes us feel like we've truly made a connection. Can anyone reach that high bar on the typical, boring dates we all go on?

One of the social scientists I consulted for this book is the Stanford sociologist Robb Willer. Willer said that he had several friends who had taken dates to a monster truck rally. If you aren't familiar with monster truck rallies, basically these giant-ass trucks, with names like Skull Crusher and The ReJEWvinator,\* ride up huge dirt hills and do crazy jumps. Sometimes they fly over a bunch of smaller cars or even school buses. Even more nuts, sometimes those trucks assemble into a giant robot truck that literally eats cars. Not joking. It's called Truckzilla and it's worth looking into. Frankly, it sounds cool as shit, and I'm looking at tickets for the next one I can attend.



This is a monster truck that goes by the name Grave Digger. If you are a thug or gangster, please note that Grave Digger's graves are dug exclusively for trucks it is in competition with, and it does not dig graves to hide bodies from the authorities.

Anyway, for Willer's friends it started as a plan to do something campy and ironic, since they weren't big car and truck fans so much as curious about this interesting and kind of bizarre subculture. It turned out to be a great date event: fun, funny, exciting, and different. Instead of the usual boring résumé exchange, the couples were placed in an interesting environment and got to really get a sense of their own rapport. Two of the couples he mentioned were still together and happily dating. Sadly, another one of the couples was making out in a small car that was soon run over and crushed by a monster truck named King Krush. Very unfortunate.

In one of our subreddit threads we asked people to tell us about their best first dates, and it was amazing to see how many involved doing things that are easy and accessible but require just a bit more creativity than dinner and a movie.

One gentleman wrote:

*I took her to an alpaca farm after she said she thought they were the cutest thangsss. After sweet talking the farm owner, he let us walk into the barn where all the lil guys overcame their initial trepidation and then surrounded us in the most adorable way possible. After nuzzling with them for an hour, we went to Taco Bell. I burned myself horribly on an apple empanada, but it got her to laugh so I'll chalk that one up as a win. I was 18, the whole date cost about \$7, and I got her to smile a bunch, so yeah, that was great.*

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\* Okay, I made up ReJEWvinator, but it would be cool if there were a Jewish monster truck scene.

Here's another animal story:

*His parents both work in media, and every year he goes to the Westminster Dog Show at Madison Square Garden and finds his way backstage through a combination of walking with a purpose and flashing media credentials his parents help with. Talk about impressing a first date! We then bought wine, which they served out of sippy cups, and made a drinking game out of the dog show. (Take a drink every time a dog jumps when it's not supposed to, and so on.)*

Dating aside, I'm definitely playing a Westminster dog show drinking game ASAP. That sounds fun!

And here's one that involved the most typical activity imaginable, but with a simple wardrobe twist that transformed everything:

*It was just dinner and drinks . . . I showed up to the restaurant and he was in a FULL beekeeper's suit, just sitting/chillin' at the table waiting for me.*

*It was THE total ice breaker. I laughed so hard (in an endearing way.) The staff seemed confused and some people at neighboring tables were laughing. One guy, about my age, asked if we were on a reality show. We talked about his bees and honey and the little honey business he's starting up. He even brought little honey samples for me to try! HAHA! (And I did, and it was delicious.) We had a great dinner and great conversation. He told me he was having a great time and asked if I wanted to go for a drink sometime, I said sure. He pulled out his phone and texted me at the table, "hey, are you free for a drink tonight?" I found that so sweet and silly, I texted him back and we totally went for drinks.*

Now, granted, I'm not saying that we should all show up on dates wearing beekeeper suits. The dates that are not boring are not all super eccentric things. The common thread is that they weren't just résumé exchanges over a drink or dinner; they were situations

in which people could experience interesting things together and learn what it was like to be with someone new.

## THE EFFECTS OF NON-BORING-ASS DATES

**There is social science that shows that more interesting dates like this can lead to more romantic success.** In their famous 1974 study called “Some Evidence for Heightened Sexual Attraction Under Conditions of High Anxiety,” Arthur Aron and Donald Dutton sent an attractive woman to the Capilano River in Vancouver, Canada.<sup>4</sup> The river runs through a deep canyon, across which were two bridges. One of the bridges—the control bridge—was very sturdy. It was constructed of heavy cedar, had high handrails, and ran only about ten feet above the water. The second bridge—the experimental bridge—was much, much scarier. It was made of wooden boards attached to wire cables and had a tendency to tilt and sway. The handrails were low, and if you fell, it was a two-hundred-foot drop onto rocks and shallow rapids.

Of the two bridges, only the second was, neurologically speaking, arousing. The researchers had the attractive woman approach men as they crossed each of the bridges. She then told the men she was doing a psychological study and asked if they’d take a brief survey. Afterward, she gave the men her phone number and told them to call if they had any additional questions about the experiment. The researchers predicted that men on the shaky bridge would be more likely to call, as they might mistake their arousal, actually caused by fear, for romantic arousal caused by attraction to the woman. Sure enough, more men on the shaky bridge made the call.

Must have been a bummer for those dudes, though:

*“Hey, Sharon? It’s Dave from the bridge study. I know this may sound weird, but I was wondering . . . would you like to grab a cup of coffee or something sometime?”*

*"No, David. Sorry, this isn't Sharon. This is Martin. I'm a lab assistant. This was actually also part of the study. We wanted to see if you'd be more likely to call Sharon if you were on the more precarious bridge, and you were! This is great."*

*"Oh, okay . . . Do you know how to get in touch with Sharon?"*

*"No. I don't. This is the decoy number we gave all of you guys. Man, she is something, though, huh? [long pause] All right. Thanks again. Bye, David."*

*"Bye." [sad]*

Aron published another study, titled "Couples' Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship Quality" (damn, dude, shorten the names of your studies!), where he took sixty couples who were doing okay and had them (a) participate in activities that were novel and exciting (e.g., skiing, hiking), (b) participate in activities that were pleasant/mundane (e.g., dinner, movie), or (c) participate in no activity (this was the control group).<sup>5</sup>

The couples that did the novel and exciting activities showed a significantly greater increase in relationship quality.

Now, many of you are probably thinking that this directly contradicts a study cited by Keanu Reeves's character at the end of the film *Speed*. "I've heard relationships based on intense experiences never work," he says. "Okay," replies Sandra Bullock's character, "we'll have to base it on sex, then."

I'm not sure where Keanu's character, Jack Traven, got his information, but if you trust that Aron and his colleagues aren't bullshitting us, it seems like participating in novel and exciting activities increases our attraction to people. Do the dates you usually go on line up more with the mundane/boring or the exciting/novel variety? If I look back on my dating life, I wonder how much better I (and the other person) would have fared if I had done something exciting rather than just get a stupid drink at a local bar.

So maybe for your next date think it through and plan it out perfectly.

Instead of dinner at a nice restaurant, go to dinner at a nice restaurant *but* hire some actors who can do solid German accents to show up and fake an eighties *Die Hard*-style terrorist takeover of the place to create the danger effect seen in the shaky-bridge study. Then, after you narrowly escape, go outside and see that the road you have to take is super hilly and very dangerous. That's when you say, "Maybe we should take my ride." You point her to your car—that's right, the monster truck Grave Digger. After that, you ride home, where you leap over dozens of cars and shoot fire from the sides of your tires.

Your date will be excited in no time.

## MORE BORING-ASS DATES?

**The quality of dates is one thing, but what about the quantity?** When thinking about that question, I recalled a change I made in my own personal dating policy at one point. While I was single in New York, the city of options, I found myself and a lot of my friends just exploring as many options as we could. There were a lot of first dates but not as many third dates. We were consistently choosing to meet as many people as possible instead of investing in a relationship. The goal was seemingly to meet someone who instantly swept us off our feet, but it just didn't seem to be happening. I felt like I was never meeting people I *really, really* liked. Was everyone shitty? Or was I shitty? Maybe I was okay, but my dating strategy was shitty? Maybe I was kind of shitty and my dating strategy was kind of shitty too?

At a certain point I decided to change my dating strategy as a personal experiment. I would invest more in people and spend more time with one person. Rather than go on four different dates, what if I went on four dates with one person?

If I went out with a girl, and the date felt like it was a six, normally I wouldn't have gone on a second date. Instead, I would have

been on my phone texting other options, trying to find that elusive first date that would be a nine or a ten. With this new mentality, I would go on a second date. What I found is that a first date that was a six was usually an eight on the second date. I knew the person better and we kept building a good rapport together. I discovered things about them that weren't initially apparent. We'd develop more inside jokes and just generally get along better, because we were familiar.

Just casually dating many people had rarely led to this kind of discovery. In the past I had probably been eliminating folks who could have possibly provided fruitful relationships, short- or long-term, if I'd just given them more of a chance. Unlike my enlightened friend in Monroe, I just hadn't had enough faith in people.

Now I felt much better. Instead of trying to date so many different people and getting stressed out with texting games and the like, I was really getting to know a few people and having a better time for it.

After doing the research for this book and spending time reading papers with long-ass titles like "Couples' Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship Quality," I realized the results of my personal experiment were quite predictable.

Initially, we are attracted to people by their physical appearance and traits we can quickly recognize. But the things that really make us fall for someone are their deeper, more unique qualities, and usually those only come out during sustained interactions.

In a fascinating study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, University of Texas psychologists Paul Eastwick and Lucy Hunt show that in most dating contexts, a person's "mate value" matters less than their "unique value."<sup>6</sup>

The authors explain that they define "mate value" as the average first impression of how attractive someone is, based largely on things like looks, charisma, and professional success, and "unique value" as the extent to which someone rates a specific person above or below that average first impression. For instance, they explain

the unique value of a man they call Neil like this: "Even if Neil is a 6 on average, certain women may vary in their impressions of him. Amanda fails to be charmed by his obscure literary references and thinks he is a 3. Yet Eileen thinks he is a 9; she finds his allusions captivating." In most cases, people's unique traits and values are difficult to recognize, let alone appreciate, in an initial encounter. There are just too many things going through our minds to fully take in what makes that other person special and interesting. People's deeper and more distinctive traits emerge gradually through shared experiences and intimate encounters, the kinds we sometimes have when we give relationships a chance to develop but not when we serially first date.

No wonder that, as Eastwick and Hunt report, "Most people do not initiate romantic relationships immediately after forming first impressions of each other" but instead do it gradually, when an unexpected or perhaps long-awaited spark transforms a friendship or acquaintance into something sexual and serious. According to one recent study, only 6 percent of adolescents in romantic relationships say that they got together soon after meeting.<sup>7</sup> The number is surely much higher among adults, especially now that online dating is so prevalent, but even people who meet through Tinder or OkCupid are much more likely to turn a random first date into a meaningful relationship if they follow the advice of our Monroe friend Jimmy: There's something uniquely valuable in everyone, and we'll be much happier and better off if we invest the time and energy it takes to find it.

But seriously, if the person doesn't clip their toenails or wear clean socks, look elsewhere.

There are plenty of options.