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## The Man Date

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

**T**HE delicate posturing began with the phone call.

The proposal was that two buddies back in New York City for a holiday break in December meet to visit the Museum of Modern Art after its major renovation.

"He explicitly said, 'I know this is kind of weird, but we should probably go,' " said Matthew Speiser, 25, recalling his conversation with John Putman, 28, a former classmate from Williams College.

The weirdness was apparent once they reached the museum, where they semi-avoided each other as they made their way through the galleries and eschewed any public displays of connoisseurship. "We definitely went out of our way to look at things separately," recalled Mr. Speiser, who has had art-history classes in his time.

"We shuffled. We probably both pretended to know less about the art than we did."

Eager to cut the tension following what they perceived to be a slightly unmanly excursion - two guys looking at art together - they headed directly to a bar. "We couldn't stop talking about the fact that it was ridiculous we had spent the whole day together one on one," said Mr. Speiser, who is straight, as is Mr. Putman. "We were purging ourselves of insecurity."

Anyone who finds a date with a potential romantic partner to be a minefield of unspoken rules should consider the man date, a rendezvous between two straight men that is even more socially perilous.

Simply defined a man date is two heterosexual men socializing without the crutch of business or sports. It is two guys meeting for the kind of outing a straight man might reasonably arrange with a woman. Dining together across a table without the aid of a television is a man date; eating at a bar is not. Taking a walk in the park together is a man date; going for a jog is not. Attending the movie "Friday Night Lights" is a man date, but going to see the Jets play is definitely not.

"Sideways," the Oscar-winning film about two buddies touring the central California wine country on the eve of the wedding of one of them, is one long and boozy man date.

Although "man date" is a coinage invented for this article, appearing nowhere in the literature of male bonding (or of homosexual panic), the 30 to 40 straight men interviewed, from their 20's to their 50's, living in cities across the country, instantly recognized the peculiar ritual even if they had not consciously examined its dos and don'ts. Depending on the activity and on the two men involved, an undercurrent of homoeroticism that may be present determines what feels comfortable or not on a man date, as Mr. Speiser and Mr. Putman discovered in their squeamishness at the Modern.

Jim O'Donnell, a professor of business and economics at Huntington University in Indiana, who said his life had been changed by a male friend, urges men to get over their discomfort in socializing one on one because they have much to gain from the emotional support of male friendships. (Women understand this instinctively, which is why there is no female equivalent to the awkward man date; straight women have long met for dinner or a movie without a second thought.)

"A lot of quality time is lost as we fritter around with minor stuff like the Final Four scores," said Mr. O'Donnell, who was on the verge of divorce in the mid-1980's before a series of conversations over meals and walks with a friend 20 years his senior changed his thinking. "He was instrumental in turning me around in the vulnerability that he showed," said Mr. O'Donnell, who wrote about the friendship in a book, "Walking With Arthur." "I can remember times when he wanted to know why I was going to leave my wife. No guy had ever done that before."

While some men explicitly seek man dates, and others flatly reject them as pointless, most seem to view them as an unavoidable form of socializing in an age when friends can often catch up only by planning in advance. The ritual comes particularly into play for many men after college, as they adjust to a more structured, less spontaneous social life. "You see kids in college talking to each other, bull sessions," said Peter Nardi, a sociology professor at Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., who edited a book called "Men's Friendships." "But the opportunities to get close to another man, to share and talk about their feelings, are not available after a certain age."

The concern about being perceived as gay is one of the major complications of socializing one on one, many straight men acknowledge. That is what Mr. Speiser, now a graduate student at the University of Virginia, recalled about another man date he set up at a highly praised Italian restaurant in a strip mall in Charlottesville. It seemed a comfortable choice to meet his roommate, Thomas Kim, a lawyer, but no sooner had they walked in than they were confronted by cello music, amber lights, white tablecloths and a wine list.

The two exchanged a look. "It was funny," Mr. Speiser said. "We just knew we couldn't do it." Within minutes they were eating fried chicken at a "down and dirty" place down the road.

Mr. Kim, 28, who is now married, was flustered in part because he saw someone he knew at the Italian restaurant. "I was kind of worried that word might get out," he said. "This is weird, and now there is a witness maybe."

Dinner with a friend has not always been so fraught. Before women were considered men's equals, some gender historians say, men routinely confided in and sought advice from one another in ways they did not do with women, even their wives. Then, these scholars say, two things changed during the last century: an increased public awareness of homosexuality created a stigma around male intimacy, and at the same time women began encroaching on traditionally male spheres, causing men to become more defensive about notions of masculinity.

"If men become too close to other men, then they are always vulnerable to this accusation of, 'Oh, you must be gay,' " said Gregory Lehne, a medical psychologist at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine who has studied gender issues. At the same time, he added, "When you have women in the same world and seeking equality with men, then all of a sudden issues emerge in the need to maintain the male sex role."

And thus a simple meal turns into social Stratego. Some men avoid dinner altogether unless the friend is coming from out of town or has a specific problem that he wants advice about. Otherwise, grabbing beers at a bar will do just fine, thank you.

Other men say dinners may be all right, but never brunch, although a post-hangover meal taking place during brunch hours is O.K. "The company at that point is purely secondary," explained Steven Carlson, 29, a public relations executive in Chicago.

Almost all men agree that beer and hard alcohol are acceptable man date beverages, but wine is risky. And sharing a bottle is out of the question. "If a guy wants to get a glass of wine, that's O.K.," said Rob Discher, 24, who moved to Washington from Dallas and has dinner regularly with his male roommate. "But there is something kind of odd about splitting a bottle of wine with a guy."

Other restaurant red flags include coat checks, busboys who ask, "Still or sparkling?" and candles, unless there is a power failure. All of those are fine, however, at a steakhouse. "Your one go-to is if you go and get some kind of meat product," explained James Halow, 28, who works for a leveraged buyout firm in San Francisco.

Cooking for a friend at home violates the man date comfort zone for almost everyone, with a possible exemption for grilling or deep-frying. "The grilling thing would take away the majority of the stigma because there is a masculine overtone to the grill," Mr. Discher said.

And man dates should always be Dutch treat, men agree. Armen Meyer, 28, a lawyer in New York who is an unabashed man dater, remembers when he tried to pay for dinner for a friend. "I just plopped out the money and didn't even think about it," Mr. Meyer said. "He said, 'What are you doing?' And I'm like: 'I was going to pay. What's the big deal?' And he said something like, 'Guys don't pay for me,' or 'No one pays for me.' There was a certain slight power issue."

When attending a movie together - preferably with explosions or heavy special effects, never a romantic comedy - guys prefer to put a nice big seat between each other. (This only sounds like an episode of "Seinfeld.") "Going to the movie with one other guy is sort of weird, but you can balance it out by having a seat space between you," explained Ames McArdle, a financial analyst in Washington.

Men who avoid man dates altogether are often puzzled by the suggestion that they might like to spend time with male friends. "If you're buddies with another guy, there shouldn't be any work involved," Mr. Halow of San Francisco said. Which is why many men say that a successful man dates requires a guy to demonstrate concern for his friend without ever letting on. "The amount of preparation that the other guy is making is directly proportional to how awkward it is," Mr. McArdle of Washington said.

When man daters socialize with non-man daters, the activities always fall to the lowest common denominator. Mr. Meyer of New York remembers how he would ask his roommate Jonathan Freimann out for dinner by himself. But Mr. Freimann would instinctively pre-empt, by asking other guys along.

"If I had known he wanted to spend one-on-one time, I would have," Mr. Freimann explained, adding that group dinners had simply seemed "more fun." (The two had dinner in San Diego last week.)

Jeffrey Toohig, 27, is a more reliable bet for Mr. Meyer. They regularly have dinner together to discuss women, jobs and whatever else is on their minds, because, as Mr. Toohig put it, "the conversation is more in-depth than you can have at a bar." Mr. Toohig, who is looking for a job helping underdeveloped countries, divides his male friends into two groups: "good friends who I go out one on one with, and guys I go out with and we have beers and wings." And, he pointed out, dinner with Mr. Meyer has the advantage of not making his girlfriend jealous, the way dinners with his female friends do.

All men, however, agree that one rule of guy-meets-guy time is inviolable: if a woman enters the picture, a man can drop his buddies, last minute, no questions asked.

A romantic date always trumps a man date.