



## Terminal Flirt

A few hours with a handsome stranger taught me how to date like a grown-up.

Three months out of a relationship that had ended with my returning an engagement ring, I was sitting in a bar at JFK Airport, on the way home from a business trip to New York. A man sat down next to me, ordered a beer, and asked, "Are you going home or leaving home?" He was tall and older, wearing a nice suit, and his green eyes were framed by dark, long lashes.

"Going home," I replied, sitting up a little on my stool. "You?"

This was new: A handsome stranger in a suit was interested in me. He was headed to Las Vegas for a meeting, but both our flights had been delayed. Fortified by a few drinks and the fact that I was wearing a new outfit, I was up for some friendly banter. After all, I was 24 years old and had just fallen out of love.

When I met the man I almost married, I was in college. The people in my dating pool had majors, not careers. Up until three months before this, I was planning a life with my then fiance, a restaurant manager by day and folk musician by night. Traveling for work and meeting handsome businessmen in airports were both something new.

As we took turns buying each other beers, we chatted about our jobs, mostly, but also about our lives. He lived in Manhattan and was working on a venture-capital deal for a

start-up. I had been in New York for a book-launch party. Our meeting was chance, and we had absolutely no Kevin Bacon-style connections, just a little bit of chemistry. As I described the party's chichi setting and star-studded guest list, even I thought I sounded pretty interesting. Of course, what I didn't tell him was that I was the author's assistant at this book party, relegated to taking coats and helping pass hors d'oeuvres. The famous invitees were just that: invitees. Most of them didn't show. I didn't mention spilling half a glass of champagne down the front of my shirt or going out alone when no one else wanted to hit the city after the party.

Suddenly secure, I saw – and presented – a completely new version of me. I could tell my life story selectively, leaving out the disappointing or embarrassing parts. This stranger in the airport had no idea I was a lowly assistant who had just called off a wedding to a struggling musician, and, even if he did, he might not have cared. He just wanted to talk to me. So we talked. He said he had never dated anyone in publishing before. I told him I had never gone out with a venture capitalist.

It dawned on me that this was my first adult flirtation. My mind raced as I considered all the possibilities. Maybe I would meet

a banker or a diplomat, maybe even a folk musician-cum-lawyer. School had taught me that I could be anybody I wanted, but now I saw I could be *with* anybody I wanted as well.

Being unattached again didn't feel so bad when I realized that, this time out, I didn't have to date boys. I was attracted to (and, yes, attractive to) men. I had tried on the adult version of myself and showed it to someone else – a stranger, no less – who seemed to think it looked pretty good. Rather than rushing to grow up with a wedding to the wrong man, I was growing up all on my own.

I could have kissed the guy for just showing me that. Instead, as I left to catch my flight, I shook his hand. "Really nice chatting with you, venture-capital guy," I said.

"Back at you, book girl."

As soon as I walked away, my face got hot and my hands started shaking. My voice was excited as I checked in with the gate agent. But I regained my composure, and when I passed a cute guy in business class on my way to my seat, I felt a quick jolt of courage and winked at him. **BG**

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