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Playing the Dating Game – Friends Version

by Lisa A. Beach

At the age of 50, and after 27 years of marriage, I'm dating again. Well, not *exactly* dating. But it *feels* just like dating.

I'm ISO a BFF (in search of a best friend forever).

My life-long BFFs – the ones I've known since my high school days – live in the Northeast, scattered from Maryland to Pennsylvania to Rhode Island. These girls have nursed me through everything, from braces to bad decisions to heartbreaks. They've journeyed with me through parties, road trips, concerts, late night Dairy Queen runs, and 2 a.m. phone calls. My irreplaceable vintage friends hold the context of my life – the good, the bad and the ugly. If I didn't live a thousand miles away, I'm sure we'd still be meeting every few weeks for drinks.

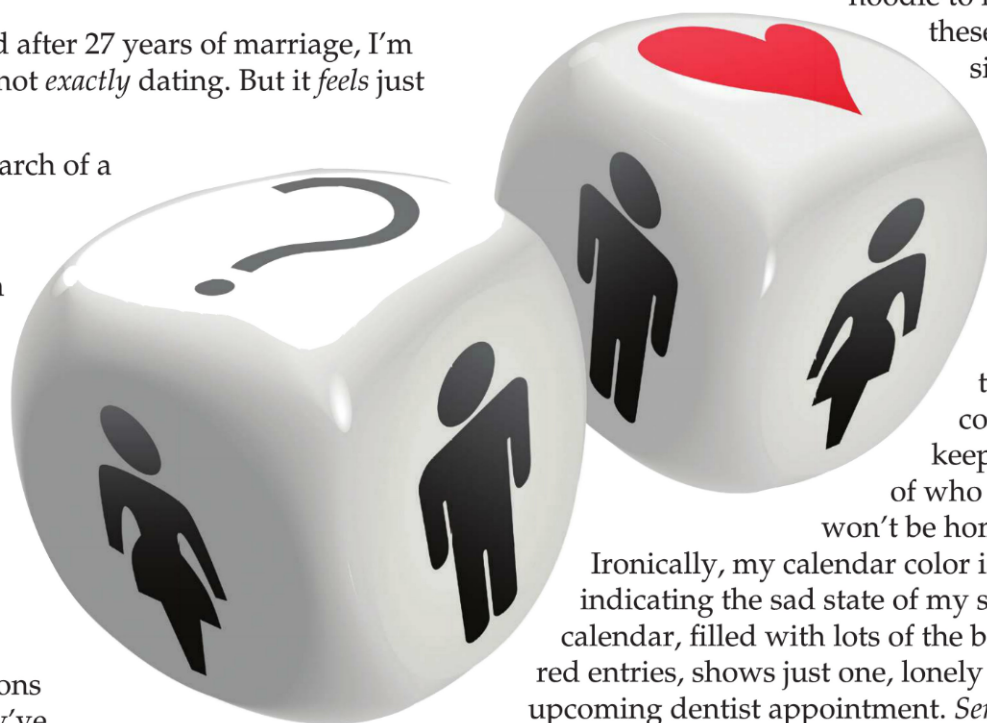
But as a stay-at-home mom and former homeschooler, my circle of local gal pals has ebbed and flowed over the past 18 years. Recently, it's ebbing more than flowing.

With playdates and mommy-and-me groups just a faded memory, many of my "mommy friends" drifted away over the years. And since I recently put my younger son in public school, I'm no longer in homeschool groups anymore. The final nail in my social coffin? As I'm transitioning back to a freelance writing career, I can't tap into the built-in communal network that a brick-and-mortar job brings. So what's a socially-starved middle-aged woman to do?

Enter, The Dating Game – Friends Version. No game show host needed this time around, but the same rules still apply: meet new people; ask questions; find a match.

Phase I: Get in the Game

For starters, I joined a few local groups to dip my toe in the "searching-for-new-friends" waters. I'm an introvert at heart, so this does not come easy to me at all. I need a life preserver or at least a very large pool



noodle to keep me afloat in these sink-or-swim social situations lest I drown in my own anxiety. But I'm putting myself out there anyway. *I got this!*

Phase 2: Build Anticipation

With two active teens, our color-coded family calendar keeps us all in-the-know of who needs a ride, who won't be home for dinner, etc.

Ironically, my calendar color is blue (perhaps indicating the sad state of my social life?). The calendar, filled with lots of the boys' green and red entries, shows just one, lonely blue entry – my upcoming dentist appointment. *Seriously? That's the extent of my social engagements this month? So I right this wrong by adding "Mom's Night Out" in big, bold, blue letters – on a weeknight!* I'm giddy with excitement.

Phase 3: Prepare

The night of my "first date" arrived – Bunco night, a few hours of drinks and dice guaranteed to yield more fun than my typical night doing a last-minute load of laundry ("I need my practice uniform clean for tomorrow, remember?") or playing Ruzzle on my phone.

As I anticipated my Big Night Out, I faced a first-date dilemma. What should I wear? I wanted to evoke just the right image to my potential new friends, trying to strike a balance between age-appropriate and "Desperately Seeking Susan (or whatever my new friend's name might be)."

So I looked into my closet, wondering what doesn't scream "I-haven't-been-out-since-the-*Friends*-finale." I realized that my clothes can be separated into three categories: Church Service/PTA Meeting, Former Career (dating back to the early 90s and even a few 80s relics complete with shoulder pads), and Comfortably Casual. Did I own *nothing* fun and trendy? Apparently not. I opted for a few "timeless" pieces (think striped T-shirt and forgettable pants) from my *no couture* comfortably casual collection.

Phase 4: Show Up

I arrived at Bunco and did a quick scan to assess the ladies. OK, good. No one *looks* like a serial killer. I'm off to a good start. (Of course, two wines later, *everybody* looks friendly.)

As the night progressed, I got to meet about a dozen or so women, who – just like me – wanted to get out of the house and have some fun. We exchanged war stories (i.e., strayed career paths, divorces, health issues) with a bit of a filter, since we didn't want to get too intimate

on a first date. We shared appetizers and sipped drinks while we rolled for ones, twos and threes. And we laughed. A *lot*.

By the end of the night, a few Dating Game contestants didn't make the cut, like the lady who didn't laugh *even once* all night (c'mon, at least *one* of my jokes was funny) and the woman wearing a sling who had a black cloud hanging over her head with all her tales of woe.

But the best part? I scored two phone numbers. It looks like I'm going on a second date.

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