

HOW TO DATE A BROWNGIRL,
BLACKGIRL, WHITEGIRL,
OR HALFIE

by Junot Díaz

Díaz's dating guide for the Dominican American teenage male takes on the authority of experience by employing a narrator speaking in second person, similar to Tucker's narrator in "How I Learned to Fly." In his piece, Díaz creates a progressive set of instructions, starting with how to evict family members from an apartment and eliminate all vestiges of obvious Dominican "ghetto" culture (like government cheese, photos of family back in DR, a wastebasket full of soiled toilet paper) in readiness for a date.

Next, Díaz moves on to more specifics for whether or not the girl is a local or an "outsider"—someone from another neighborhood—and whether she's brown, black, white, or mixed ("halfie"). These categories come with Díaz's observations about the girl's parents (such as what kind of car they drive), the best place to go for dinner (a Dominican restaurant if she's "from around the way," Wendy's if she's not), what to talk about at dinner, what to do if threatened by the local bully on the walk there or back, and what to expect as her response to this bully. They also come with Díaz's philosophical asides, ranging from why to avoid a fight with this bully who could "eat you if he wanted," to the special needs of "halfies" whose parents are probably refugees from the civil rights movement and whose complicated self-hatred will not

allow “attention-grabbing” behavior in school to translate into permissive behavior in private. It seems as if this narrator has developed a casebook on all possible scenarios, with allowances for different outcomes.

Díaz is not afraid to include small gestures that reveal cultural attitudes, even if these attitudes do not put Dominicans in the best light. Not only does his narrator hide his origins when he gets rid of the Dominican artifacts in his apartment; he instructs reticence about insider knowledge, such as what tear gas smells like—something that his mother’s generation would recognize from “the year the United States invaded your island.” He also recommends running a hand through your hair “like the whiteboys do” when you want to appear calm, cool, and collected, even though “the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa.”

While it could be argued that this piece provides evidence for a stereotypical machismo attitude toward women, Díaz’s narrator never allows his quips to outstrip his recognition that a date, with all of its possible successes, disasters, and confusing moments, ends—and then you are left alone, as you were—perhaps even less than you were. As his final instruction, Díaz’s narrator warns, “Don’t go downstairs. Don’t fall asleep. It won’t help.”

Junot Díaz moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic when he was six years old, settling in New Jersey. This piece is from his short story collection *Drown* and was originally published in *The New Yorker*, which placed him on a list of the top twenty writers for the twenty-first century. He recently published his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, to great critical acclaim. Díaz is currently a professor of creative writing at MIT.

Díaz’s “dating guide” bears an obvious “casebook” resemblance to Alexie’s “Indian Education.” In addition to its second-person narrative, its tone, seemingly assertive and confident but actually self-deprecating and anxious, resembles that of Tucker’s narrator in “How I Learned to Fly.”

Wait for your brother and your mother to leave the apartment. You've already told them that you're feeling too sick to go to Union City to visit that tía who likes to squeeze your nuts. (He's gotten big, she'll say.) And even though your moms knows you ain't sick you stuck to your story until finally she said, Go ahead and stay, malcriado.

Clear the government cheese from the refrigerator. If the girl's from the Terrace stack the boxes behind the milk. If she's from the Park or Society Hill hide the cheese in the cabinet above the oven, way up where she'll never see. Leave yourself a reminder to get it out before morning or your moms will kick your ass. Take down any embarrassing photos of your family in the campo, especially the one with the half-naked kids dragging a goat on a rope leash. The kids are your cousins and by now they're old enough to understand why you're doing what you're doing. Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro. Make sure the bathroom is presentable. Put the basket with all the crapped-on toilet paper under the sink. Spray the bucket with Lysol, then close the cabinet.

Shower, comb, dress. Sit on the couch and watch TV. If she's an outsider her father will be bringing her, maybe her mother. Neither of them want her seeing any boys from the Terrace—people get stabbed in the Terrace—but she's strong-headed and this time will get her way. If she's a whitegirl you know you'll at least get a hand job.

The directions were in your best handwriting, so her parents won't think you're an idiot. Get up from the couch and check the parking lot. Nothing. If the girl's local, don't sweat it. She'll flow over when she's good and ready. Sometimes she'll run into her other friends and a whole crowd will show up at your apartment and even though that means you ain't getting shit it will be fun anyway and you'll wish these people would come over more often. Sometimes the girl won't flow over at all and the next day in school she'll say sorry, smile and you'll be stupid enough to believe her and ask her out again.

Wait and after an hour go out to your corner. The neighborhood is full of traffic. Give one of your boys a shout and when he says, Are you still waiting on that bitch? say, Hell yeah.

Get back inside. Call her house and when her father picks up ask if

she's there. He'll ask, Who is this? Hang up. He sounds like a principal or a police chief, the sort of dude with a big neck, who never has to watch his back. Sit and wait. By the time your stomach's ready to give out on you, a Honda or maybe a Jeep pulls in and out she comes.

Hey, you'll say.

Look, she'll say. My mom wants to meet you. She's got herself all worried about nothing.

Don't panic. Say, Hey, no problem. Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa. She will look good. The white ones are the ones you want the most, aren't they, but usually the out-of-towners are black, blackgirls who grew up with ballet and Girl Scouts, who have three cars in their driveways. If she's a halfie don't be surprised that her mother is white. Say, Hi. Her moms will say hi and you'll see that you don't scare her, not really. She will say that she needs easier directions to get out and even though she has the best directions in her lap give her new ones. Make her happy.

You have choices. If the girl's from around the way, take her to El Cibao for dinner. Order everything in your busted-up Spanish. Let her correct you if she's Latina and amaze her if she's black. If she's not from around the way, Wendy's will do. As you walk to the restaurant talk about school. A local girl won't need stories about the neighborhood but the other ones might. Supply the story about the loco who'd been storing canisters of tear gas in his basement for years, how one day the canisters cracked and the whole neighborhood got a dose of the military-strength stuff. Don't tell her that your moms knew right away what it was, that she recognized its smell from the year the United States invaded your island.

Hope that you don't run into your nemesis, Howie, the Puerto Rican kid with the two killer mutts. He walks them all over the neighborhood and every now and then the mutts corner themselves a cat and tear it to shreds, Howie laughing as the cat flips up in the air, its neck twisted around like an owl, red meat showing through the soft fur. If his dogs haven't cornered a cat, he will walk behind you and ask, Hey, Yuniór, is that your new fuckbuddy?

Let him talk. Howie weighs about two hundred pounds and could

eat you if he wanted. At the field he will turn away. He has new sneakers, and doesn't want them muddy. If the girl's an outsider she will hiss now and say, What a fucking asshole. A homegirl would have been yelling back at him the whole time, unless she was shy. Either way don't feel bad that you didn't do anything. Never lose a fight on a first date or that will be the end of it.

Dinner will be tense. You are not good at talking to people you don't know. A halfie will tell you that her parents met in the Movement, will say, Back then people thought it a radical thing to do. It will sound like something her parents made her memorize. Your brother once heard that one and said, Man, that sounds like a whole lot of Uncle Tomming to me. Don't repeat this.

Put down your hamburger and say, It must have been hard.

She will appreciate your interest. She will tell you more. Black people, she will say, treat me real bad. That's why I don't like them. You'll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don't ask. Let her speak on it and when you're both finished eating walk back into the neighborhood. The skies will be magnificent. Pollutants have made Jersey sunsets one of the wonders of the world. Point it out. Touch her shoulder and say, That's nice, right?

Get serious. Watch TV but stay alert. Sip some of the Bermúdez your father left in the cabinet, which nobody touches. A local girl may have hips and a thick ass but she won't be quick about letting you touch. She has to live in the same neighborhood you do, has to deal with you being all up in her business. She might just chill with you and then go home. She might kiss you and then go, or she might, if she's reckless, give it up, but that's rare. Kissing will suffice. A whitegirl might just give it up right then. Don't stop her. She'll take her gum out of her mouth, stick it to the plastic sofa covers and then will move close to you. You have nice eyes, she might say.

Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own.

She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain, say, I like you. You'll sound smooth.

You'll be with her until about eight-thirty and then she will want to

wash up. In the bathroom she will hum a song from the radio and her waist will keep the beat against the lip of the sink. Imagine her old lady coming to get her, what she would say if she knew her daughter had just lain under you and blown your name, pronounced with her eighth-grade Spanish, into your ear. While she's in the bathroom call one of your boys and say, *Lo hice, loco*. Or just sit back on the couch and smile.

But usually it won't work this way. Be prepared. She will not want to kiss you. Just cool it, she'll say. The halfie might lean back, breaking away from you. She will cross her arms, say, I hate my tits. Stroke her hair but she will pull away. I don't like anybody touching my hair, she will say. She will act like somebody you don't know. In school she is known for her attention-grabbing laugh, as high and far-ranging as a gull, but here she will worry you. You will not know what to say.

You're the only kind of guy who asks me out, she will say. Your neighbors will start their hyena calls, now that the alcohol is in them. You and the blackboys.

Say nothing. Let her button her shirt, let her comb her hair, the sound of it stretching like a sheet of fire between you. When her father pulls in and beeps, let her go without too much of a good-bye. She won't want it. During the next hour the phone will ring. You will be tempted to pick it up. Don't. Watch the shows you want to watch, without a family around to debate you. Don't go downstairs. Don't fall asleep. It won't help. Put the government cheese back in its place before your moms kills you.

GLOSSARY

malcriado (251): Spanish for bad-mannered.

government cheese (251): block cheese, usually a combination of three cheeses, provided to welfare and food stamp recipients during the Reagan era.

campo (251): unincorporated town (for example, in the Dominican Republic).

Bermúdez (253): Dominican rum.

Lo hice, loco (254): Spanish for "I did it, (you) crazy."