

They're scared. They're lost

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Danièle Parent has no qualms about telling a man he talks too much, is wearing too much aftershave or needs to clean his shoes. She's a seduction coach, and it's her job to teach her clients how to woo.

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It's a good thing Danièle Parent has a strong stomach because she's seen some awful things. The worst? A high-powered Montreal executive who removed a wad of gum from his mouth and planted it on the white linen tablecloth in front of him.

But Parent, who was sitting across from him at the time, did what few wives or girlfriends would be brave enough to do. She told the guy he was a pig. Not in exactly those words, of course. "I have a way of saying things. That's probably my biggest talent," said Parent.

It's a talent that comes in handy in Parent's line of work. The tall, statuesque blond, a former beauty-pageant winner, calls herself a seduction coach. Parent charges \$100 an hour for private coaching sessions. The lessons run between an hour and a half and two hours and take place over dinner at Montreal's chicest restaurants -- Cube, Café Ferreira, Globe and Restaurant Bice -- and Parent's clients foot that bill, too.

As Parent sees it, she is providing an essential service -- as necessary as dental work, only a lot less painful. Her clients are Montreal businessmen and lawyers, most of them over 40 and recently divorced. "Here in Quebec, men don't flirt any more. They don't know how. They're scared, so they sit around and wait. The old lines, like 'Do you live with your parents?' and 'What's your sign?' that they asked when they were 25 don't work any more. They're lost," she says, clucking like a mother hen.

One such lost soul agreed to be interviewed, provided he remain anonymous. The 53-year-old marketing consultant divorced three years ago after a 25-year marriage. He tried meeting women at bars, but little came of his attempts at seduction. "I could go up to a woman and buy her a drink, but after that, I found myself feeling very uncomfortable," he said.

After four dinners out with Parent, the man's luck began to change. "She gave me confidence in an area I was never comfortable in," he said. Parent also gave him pointers -- sit up straight, keep his hands on the table in front of him, look into his date's eyes and refrain from interrupting. "She pointed out that I talk quickly and that I needed to focus

more on the other person, and less on myself," said the man, who has recently hooked up with someone special. "The funny thing is, she looks a lot like Danièle," he said.

Parent is elusive about her age ("in my 40s" is all she's willing to admit). She wears her hair short and spiked, and on the day we meet, she's wearing a long black tuxedo dress-coat over an ankle-length burgundy skirt, with matching burgundy sandals. A Hermès scarf draped over her shoulders completes the look.

The certainty with which Parent expresses her views, and the way she looks directly at you, make you want to sit up straight. You suddenly hope there isn't a bagel seed, left over from lunch, stuck between your teeth.

Parent's coaching sessions begin the moment she meets her client at a restaurant. Lesson One: Parent is always between 10 and 20 minutes late. Arriving on time, she says, is a definite no-no when you're invited for dinner. "That's etiquette. Coming early is even worse," she says, her green eyes flashing at the thought.

Parent estimates that it takes her about 30 seconds to assess a client -- and she shares that assessment as they consult their dinner menus. The most common problem she's encountered since she began her seduction coaching classes last January? Too much aftershave. "I tell him too much is bad, particularly at dinner, because you can't smell the food," said Parent.

Next on the list is too much jewellery -- this includes pinky rings, gold chains, and ID bracelets. "I tell him very nicely that women do not appreciate men who wear jewellery. That's out. It's been out for ages," said Parent.

Shoes say a lot. If their shoes aren't shiny, Parent's clients will hear about it. "Women judge a man by his shoes. If he has clean shoes, he's OK. He's on his way. It's a good start," she said.

Parent uses humour to deliver her critiques. "We laugh a lot," she says. Her laugh -- deep, throaty and frequent -- comes as a contrast to her polished appearance.

Parent also trains clients in the art of conversation. This lesson begins with a list of subjects she considers taboo at the dinner table: politics, religion, money and sex. "The table is not a place to fight," she explains, adding that married couples would do well to follow this advice, too.

The most seductive men are good listeners, says Parent. They concentrate on their dates, and would never be caught ogling the young waitress in the slinky black dress. Parent warns clients not to go on and on about themselves -- or their household appliances. "One guy I was out with spent 45 minutes describing his new dishwasher," Parent recalled.

When Parent discusses men's bad habits, her tone is a curious mix of disapproval and indulgence. After all, as she's quick to point out, men's foibles are good for business. When her clients go to the washroom, Parent whips her notebook out of her purse and

records her observations. "Men are an incredible species. They feed me with all the mistakes they make," she said.

Born in Montreal, Parent is notably vague when you try to pin her down on dates. She does reveal that between the ages of five and 18, she was educated at convent boarding schools in Montreal, where she was schooled in etiquette. Seduction came later.

After completing her BA at the Université de Montréal, Parent decided to cash in on her good looks. She spent 15 years as a model, mostly in Montreal and Toronto. A finalist in the Miss Canada competition ("It was the late '70s"), Parent dropped out when her future husband, a hematologist, proposed marriage. The marriage lasted 10 years and produced one son.

After the marriage broke up, Parent worked as an executive assistant, one who didn't type or take dictation. Instead, she had several clients for whom she handled tasks such as buying their wives gifts and sending flowers on their anniversaries. "I was so good, the wives got suspicious," said Parent.

Next came a stint as the host of Cruising Bar ("I never liked the name," Parent is quick to add), a phone-in radio show in which Parent arranged on-air matches between lonely Quebecers. She was good at that, too, because she recalls spending summer weekends attending weddings of all the couples she'd brought together. "I stopped going at one point. It was costing me a fortune in presents," she said.

Two years ago, Parent began giving etiquette lessons at conferences. At the Bal des Tulipes, a ball attended by high-society Montrealers, she realized men were in desperate need of her help. Women, she says, tend to pay attention to details. But when Parent spotted the president of a major Quebec company with his dinner napkin tucked under his collar like a bib, and another man wielding his steak knife like a weapon, she realized it was time for private coaching lessons.

Parent is no surrogate date for lonely men -- and there's no hanky-panky. She's careful to use the word "client" to describe the men with whom she has dinner, and she never works on weekends. "I don't want to give the wrong impression," she explains.

There are men who Parent suspects would like more than a lesson over dinner, but so far, she's never had to fend anyone off. "I never give them a chance. Besides," she says, waving a manicured hand in the air, "look at me. I'm 5-foot-10. If they would try, they're dead."

Parent never discusses sex with her clients, but she concedes that there's etiquette even in the bedroom. Only she's reluctant to share these particular tips. "Well just one," she says, smiling coyly. "He shouldn't keep his socks on!"