

“Bridget Jones has got nothing on Sydney Alexander and her dating escapades! Christa Ann Banister expertly weaves together faith, humor, and dating mayhem in a way that someone could only after having survived the ordeal herself.”

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—LAURA MACCORKLE, senior editor, Crosswalk.com

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DATES

CONFESSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN SERIAL DATER

CHRISTA ANN BANISTER

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I love walking through life with you.

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CHAPTER 1

IN SERIOUS NEED OF THERAPY

My darling girl, when are you going to realize that being normal is not necessarily a virtue? It rather denotes a lack of courage!

— AUNT FRANCES OWENS (STOCKARD CHANNING)
IN *PRACTICAL MAGIC*, 1998

WHEN DANIEL TOLD ME he was in between jobs, I believed him.

And when Michael told me that I was the only girl for him, I believed him too. Well, until I found out he was also dating Jenn, Allison, and Jordyn. Then there was Taylor, who was more in love with his own reflection and his favorite Diesel jeans than he could ever be with me. And Tyler, who didn't have much self-esteem and always wondered if he was good enough. With Ben I was the girl friend, never the girlfriend. See, he was dating Lauren, and while they had almost nothing in common, he wanted to go out with her and have me as a confidante on the side. Now, isn't that a nice arrangement?

Yeah, nice for everyone except me.

After I got over Ben, there was Travis. Tall Travis. He was six foot eight, impossibly sweet, and a medical missionary in

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training. For once, it wasn't him—it was me, in fact. Or rather, my ambitions. He told me when I was done with “my little writing thing” he'd consider dating me for the long haul. I guess I could see his point: If I was going to have that family of ten he'd dreamt about ever since he was a kid, I was going to have to start as soon as possible. Trouble is, I really loved writing. And I still do.

So good-bye, Travis; hello, Daniel.

Confused yet? Yeah, so am I, and it's *my* story. As we speak, it's six days after my twenty-seventh birthday, and as I was polishing off the rest of the delicious marble cake my friend Kristin made, I realized that after more than ten years of dating, I'm *still* a serial dater. I don't know how this keeps happening, but frankly, it's getting old. Really, why isn't there some kind of support group for my condition? Why are there weekly meetings for Weight Watchers, mystery novel fans, and even knitting enthusiasts (believe it or not, there's a Thursday night knitting club that meets in my church's basement), but not for excessive daters?

In fact, I can just picture it now. *I'm sitting in a circle in a small, sweat-soaked room at a nearby YMCA with other guys and girls just like me: “Hi, my name is Sydney Alexander, and I'm a serial dater.” “Hi, Sydney!” they chime back enthusiastically, their sympathetic eyes fastened on my brown ones, wondering how it all went wrong for me. Then one by one, we tell our traumatic tales of love gone wrong.*

And even as difficult as it would be to do that in front of complete strangers, it would be strangely comforting to know I'm not alone.

Now, if you knew me well, which you will very soon, you'd understand that the serial dating route wasn't exactly the plan I'd envisioned. And since we're in the process of becoming such

good friends, I'll go the full disclosure route and tell you that I once devised what I thought was a pretty amazing future for myself. Unlike the majority of my Christian college friends, I decided I could forgo the husband for the first couple of years after graduation. Instead, I'd date casually, concentrate on my career, get more involved in church, and pay off that pesky student loan. And since I was being so responsible, maybe I'd save up for a down payment on a renovated downtown loft. And maybe the latest Prada bag. Or a trendy Fendi clutch, depending on my mood.

Of course, after all that was accomplished and I'd traveled to some of Europe's best sights, I'd consider settling down and getting married. Now, of course, there's nothing wrong with having goals. But mine were a bit presumptuous, even if I didn't believe it at the time.

And like most man-made plans (or in this case, woman-made!), things didn't exactly go the way I'd hoped. Quite the opposite, actually. Even if I'd wanted to get married right after graduation, I probably wouldn't have had time. After all, I barely had time to sleep. See, it took me a little longer than I'd scheduled to land a respectable job in journalism, and I was forced to work three not-so-glamorous jobs to make ends meet. So when I wasn't sporting a hideous smock while working the late shift at Walgreens or serving as the requisite errand girl at an upstart music magazine, I was trolling the temp agency circuit to see if I could pick up a gig or two to supplement my less-than-stellar income.

So as you can probably guess, I didn't spring for the loft, a designer purse, or a trip to Paris. But somehow, each month God provided enough funds to pay the rent and stock up on Lean Cuisines, luxuries I learned to appreciate in a hurry.

Three years later, even though I drive a responsible, fuel-

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efficient Toyota Prius instead of the Lexus SUV I really wanted, proudly own my first condo in the warehouse district of downtown Minneapolis, and have managed to pay off the majority of my student loan, I can't seem to break the casual-dating cycle I once thought was perfect. It's just date after date without any hope of a future. And frankly, I'm beginning to think that prearranged marriages aren't such a bad idea. Seriously.

My mom even suggested as much when she drove over from Wisconsin one Friday afternoon recently. "You know, there was a time when relationships weren't so complicated, Syd," she'd said as we browsed around the juniors department at Macy's in search of a gift for my sister, Samantha, who was about to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. "Before you were born, I could've just arranged for you to marry . . . oh, I don't know . . . Jeff Carson, and that would've been —"

"What? You mean the Jeff Carson who hated me so much that he threw rocks at me so I'd fall off my bike?"

"Maybe that was his way of showing he cared," she'd said with a laugh as she held up a pale pink cardigan. "Think she'd like this?"

"Yeah, I think that color would look really nice on her," I said. "Too bad I can't find a man as easy as we can find the right sweater for Samantha."

"Well, it wouldn't have to be if you just weren't so —"

"Weren't so what, Mom? Picky?"

"To be honest, honey, you are a little picky," she said. "I mean, it's important to have standards, but I think yours are a little out of whack sometimes. It's like you think Prince Charming is the only option."

"So, what sounds good for lunch?" I asked. My mom and I

didn't see each other that often, so an argument didn't really seem worth the trouble.

Okay, before you assume that I'm just another whiny drama queen who likes to complain about men, that's not my *modus operandi*. But have you ever noticed how men are truly puzzling creatures? Just when you think you *almost* have them figured out, they sprout a new anomaly you never knew existed.

Take my most recent boyfriend, Daniel, for example.

Everything started off perfectly. Okay, maybe not perfectly, but work with me here. I was visiting a friend in Chicago right before Christmas when I met him. I desperately needed a break from the excess of deadlines I had at *Get Away*, the monthly travel magazine I've worked at since I officially turned in my smock at Walgreens. So I decided to do just that—get away—and Chicago is always a great escape. Even if it's just for the shopping on Michigan Avenue, a casual lunch in Greektown, the unbelievable deep dish pizza at Gino's East, or a Cubs game at Wrigley Field, you can always count on having a good time in Chi-town.

And my good friend Drew (he's a writer too) insists on nothing less whenever I am in town. With him, it's go, go, go. After we hit about fifteen thrift shops (his favorite places to pick up odd eighties memorabilia that I *still* can't figure out why he collects) in the course of five hours, I was exhausted. My feet hurt, and I really needed some Starbucks. And after I sighed for probably the fifteenth time in fifteen minutes, Drew decided we'd had enough thrift shop therapy, and we made our way back to his house.

"There's someone you *have* to meet," Drew said as he put away the Bananarama, Bangles, and Pat Benatar records (yes, records) he'd bought. "His name is Daniel. I met him at this battle of the bands thing I was judging the other night for the *Trib*, and I

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think you'll have lots to talk about. He plays guitar. You know, trying to do the band thing.”

That should've been my first clue that things weren't going to work out. Even though there's something unbelievably attractive about a man who plays guitar and sings (and I have plenty of experience with *that*), there's usually a whole slew of problems and psychoses that go right along with it. And most times the guy's desire to land that elusive record deal interferes with all reason and responsibility. That description fit Daniel perfectly, although I didn't realize it at the time.

I ended up meeting Daniel later that evening just as Drew promised, and we did have a lot to talk about. We chatted about movies we liked. Music. Our faith and how we arrived at believing what we did. It was all pretty surface-level conversation, but there wasn't a lull. And before I had a chance to analyze things too much, he asked me to dinner. As I debated whether or not to go, I glanced over at Drew, who had the biggest grin on his face. Clearly, his mission was accomplished.

The next night Daniel and I headed downtown to his favorite Italian bistro. After a basket of bread drowning in olive oil and asiago cheese, a bowl of pasta, and two forks for tiramisu, things were going fine. Nicely, even. I could tell that Daniel was enjoying himself too because he asked a lot of questions and listened intently whenever I spoke. Basically we chatted about nearly every subject two people could talk about. He has a huge, loud Italian family, while mine's relatively small, since my dad passed away when I was a freshman in high school, leaving just my mom, my sister, and me. He likes to read historical fiction; I prefer the classics, chick-lit, and my guiltiest of all guilty pleasures: *Us Weekly* magazine. *Shhh*, don't tell anyone, but I've always been fascinated

by how they make the biggest deal about the most trivial matters, like when Paris Hilton went clubbing and got in a fight with her “rival” Lindsay Lohan (but wait—*are they friends this week?*) or how Renée Zellweger is “just like us” because she doesn’t wear makeup when she takes out her trash. It’s fluffy reading, for sure, but I’ve bought one almost every week for years—for its sheer entertainment value.

But what really seemed to be on Daniel’s mind more than reading was his band, Mission Space, and his plans for making it big commercially while maintaining his indie artist credibility. Thank goodness I’ve worked as a music critic, otherwise the debate on whether to get signed or stay a little more underground would have seemed a little esoteric.

“Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t mind having a few mil in the bank and touring with someone like U2,” Daniel said. “But I have to stick to my principles. That’s why I’m not sure if a record label is right for Mission Space. They’d want to make us a Top Forty pop act, and I hate writing pop hooks with a passion.”

“What’s wrong with a good pop song?” I asked. “They make people happy.”

“Well, that’s the trouble,” he said. “I’m not happy enough myself to make other people happy.”

This also might have been a clue that Daniel wasn’t exactly relationship ready—if I’d been paying more attention to what he was saying and less to his quirky sense of humor and cute smile.

As we left the restaurant a couple of hours later, it couldn’t have been more beautiful outside. There was a light snow falling and the twinkle of Christmas lights in the distance. Couples walked by arm in arm as they glanced in the decorated store windows. And as I watched them hug, laugh, and hold hands,

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I felt that familiar pang of how much I wanted a love to call my own, especially during a time of year when you're very aware of your singleness. I longed to share this incredible Chicago moment with someone, and Daniel just happened to be there. As we made our way to Starbucks for gingerbread lattes to warm us up, he seemed to have read my mind and grabbed my hand.

After a few more hours of sipping coffee and telling stories, Daniel drove me back to Drew's place. As he turned off the key, I got the nervous, slightly nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach that I always get as a date comes to a close. Just for the record, I've never particularly enjoyed the end of a date (unless the night was truly rotten and I'm finally free of my suffering). You're never quite sure of what will happen or how you'll say good-bye. And for me, a slight control freak, the unknown is a scary, scary thing.

In fact, as Daniel thanked me for a fun evening, I was having a flashback. Last summer I went on a blind date, and after a relatively fun day of hanging out in parks and coffee shops, my date leaned in to say good-bye. While I'm still not sure why, I got so nervous (and not the good kind of nervous, just to clarify) that I said, "It was really nice to meet you; take care"—and I opened the car door at record speed and bolted to the front door faster than I'd make my way through a mall to a shoe sale. In fact, it was such an awful good-bye that Samantha *still* teases me about it. "It's like Hugh Grant's 'surreal but nice' comment to Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill*," she said at the time. "I can't believe you told him to take care. Who says 'take care' anymore? You're never going to hear from him again." And she was right: I didn't. But I was actually sort of relieved, because when it came right down to it, I hadn't really felt any sparks. And how does one recover from

a scenario like that, anyway? It wasn't one of my more shining dating moments, to say the least.

Anyway, I didn't tell Daniel that it was nice to meet him. Or to take care. In fact, before I could say anything at all, he pushed my hair away from my face and kissed me. And so began our relationship . . . just like that.