《恋爱秘籍：一招脱单 世界上最有用搭讪情话》

On a wet Tuesday, I am hovering furtively in the fresh produce section of Sainsbury ’ s. But my absorption in the merits of Golden Delicious and Washington Reds is but a cunning charade. I ’ m really on a mission.

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I have just received four hours of tuition in the art of flirting from relationship coach Jean Smith and I’m here to put my skills to the test.

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Spotting a middle-aged victim, I sidle up and deliver the line suggested by Jean to provoke conversation.

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‘Um,’ I begin magnificently. ‘Have you tried that kind of apple before?’

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Flirting has been Jean’s specialist subject for more than a decade, after doing a masters degree in social anthropology. Not only has she produced an entire book on the subject (The Flirt Interpreter), but she runs ‘Flirtology’ courses.

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‘Clients appreciate a scientific approach. Flirting is a skill — you can learn it. I’m a catalyst to set people on track — it’s up to them to act on it,’ Jean says.

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My four hours with her are a condensed version of one of her courses. Judging by her central London flat where we met for the first two hours, she is doing very nicely.

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Jean asks what I’m looking for, ushering me away from ‘objectifying laundry lists’ such as height, weight and income.

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This is not to say she advocates hooking up with a short, fat pauper. But she urges me not to rule out someone just because I prefer taller men: ‘It’s holding you back. How much of your life are you standing up next to each other?’

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Then she asks what I’m doing to improve my chances of meeting someone, and suggests a big party where everybody brings a single friend, adding: ‘You need to spend more time in places where you can start up conversations without expectations.’

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This, it turns out, is largely what Jean’s ‘flirtology’ is about — not being coquettish, but simply going to places where there are other people, and talking to them. The idea is meeting as many potential partners as possible in the hope one will click. It’s a numbers game, but one you can only embark on if you’re confident enough — which is what Jean hopes to teach.

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She has also devised an unlikely acronym for six flirting signals to look for. ‘It’s HOT APE — Humour, open body-language, touch, attention, proximity and eye contact. That’s what you look for to tell someone is flirting with you. Also self-disclosure — they tell you something about themselves.’

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