

Shell Game

The perils of dating with a peanut allergy.

BY ARIANNE COHEN



I have never kissed a man at a bar. It's not because I'm kiss-shy or fear oral herpes or am germaphobic (though all these things are true). It's because I am allergic to peanuts, and there are peanuts at bars — grimy baskets of peanuts — surrounded by tipsy, hungry people, filling their hands and mouths with peanuts, drinking alcohol, chomping on some more peanuts, then sliding those peanut-covered palms under the backs of nearby blouses, and stuffing their tongues between the lips of open-mouthed, intoxicated companions.

Oh how I would love to participate, but one such kiss would send me into anaphylactic shock. Yes, I am talking about the Kiss of Death.

You probably don't realize it, but pretty much every stage of dating from kiss to consummation is gift-wrapped with nuts.

Thus, I want to tell you the story of my dating life with Nutman, a composite of past boyfriends. Rest assured, you are not missing out: I always date the same personality, so Nutmen one through six are suspiciously similar characters.

Let's start with the first meeting. New York City is dotted with low-key, literary-themed lounges, and they are filled with bookshelves, couches and cute, tall, semi-nerdy future Nutmen. I often go, and once a month a Nutman appears. We hit it off. Nutman accordingly makes every effort to touch my bare skin, which he learned from reading *The Game* or something similar. His fingers innocently skim my hand or forearm, stroke the small of my back, or reach out to brush my cheek. But we're sitting feet from the germy bowl of nuts, and what Nutman considers the touch of lust is actually the touch of hives. I place a table or chair arm or railing between us, and spend my evening dodging his fingers while sipping vodka and cranberry, a mixed drink guaranteed not to have some hidden essence of peanut like that trendy Castries Peanut Rum Crème, the killer ingredient of adventurous bartenders everywhere.

We chat, and after a while Nutman realizes that because he has yet to touch me, we're probably not going home together tonight. So he suggests a future dinner, inquiring what sort of food I like. This is where I'm supposed to indicate in two sentences that I'm both cultured and adventurous. Instead, I explain that I don't eat foods that are brown. Nor do I eat foods that are prepared with the same utensils as peanuty foods, such as stir-fry (same wok as Pad Thai) or cookies (same pan as peanut-butter cookies). Nor "combo" foods like chicken pot pie or stews, where peanuts can be easily mixed in. Nor foods with shells, like the nutty cheese rinds of France, nor pies with crusts. Nor pesto anything. Nor crunchy foods. I eat individual, non-topped items of non-crunch consistency, where all the ingredients are visible, such as a hunk of meat and green beans, or grilled cheese on white. It's a science. But I don't mention these details to Nutman.

After a few hours, we relocate to a party at someone's apartment, where nut peril reigns. Cashews fly through the air as guests try to catch the mini-grenades of death in their mouths. The pot-laced brownies are probably also laced with peanut butter or walnuts. The sugar cookies share a plate with tarts of indeterminate content.

Bowls of chips sit next to the peanut-butter cookies; I gauge the probability of peanuty fingers having touched the chips (quite high). A host heats up nachos, but did she heat up the Chinese leftovers in the same microwave? All I know is that it's 2 a.m., and I'm famished.

Nutman pops a peanut-butter cookie and any chance of making out tonight instantly evaporates. I eye a tempting pile of munchies in the kitchen — homemade not-brown cookies and store-bought banana bread. Nutman will soon witness me roaming the crowd to find the drunken cookie chef to ask about the ingredients; I try to ascertain whether she's sober enough for me to risk my life on her memory of the day she baked. Or Nutman will find me, head and arms deep inside the kitchen trash receptacle, searching for the ingredient list of that banana bread. But Nutman won't ask what the hell I'm doing — he is apparently used to label-conscious women. He just assumes that I'm a wee bit paranoid about my waistline.

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same microwave?

As the night draws to a close, my choices are to gently explain to Nutman that I can't kiss him because he's a walking plague, or to risk one tongue swap, which could result in that unfortunate scratchy feeling at the back of my throat, followed by speedily swelling eyes and lips and a friend shrieking, "ARIANNE'S HAVING AN ATTACK! CALL 911!" I opt for an awkward hug.

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I am supposedly not alone: Approximately 2% of Americans are allergic to peanuts, and like all our issues, we can blame it on our mothers. Babies are first exposed to peanuts through breast milk, and mothers who don't eat peanuts don't have allergic kids. The trouble comes when fetuses' undeveloped immune systems detect peanuts eaten by the mother, perceive them as deadly invaders and turn on a whopping immune-system response that's potentially deadly itself, better known as anaphylactic shock. My mother's pregnancy binge food was peanut butter.

More and more people share the peanut dating-disaster lifestyle. I know this because The New England Journal of Medicine recently

justified my kissing fears with a study showing that allergic people can and do have life-threatening reactions from kissing, sometimes simply because the kissee had recently brushed their teeth. I also have the keyword "peanut" tagged on various news searches, and my email regularly dings with news articles relating the ever-doubling numbers of peanut allergies. I always want to email the reporter and say, "Idiot, the numbers are growing because the kids used to just die. Now they're alive to be counted."

So my allergy is a relatively common one. But I still try to avoid bringing it up for three or four dates, because I don't want it to be my calling card. And it feels like a kind of weakness, a blemish associated with poor health that somehow doesn't fit into the image of overflowing fertility that I'm supposed to be. I worry that upon finding my Epi-Pen stash, Nutman will be triggered into a primal reaction: "She's allergic to nuts! She won't bear strong children who can survive the winter! Me must run!" Granted, this has never happened. But still.

Nutman turns out to be a trooper. He finds my behavior quirky, and thinks I'm playing coy. He requests a date. Dating, unfortunately, revolves around meals. Even if I avoid dinner dates, Nutman will show up with a box of chocolates I can't eat. And opposites attract, so I tend to draw erudite, foodie Nutmen, who make a sport of trying obscure, nut-filled restaurants: Sri Lankan, Ethiopian, Pakistani.

Nutman and I go out for dinner a few times. I veto his restaurant choices, opting for Italian or American. He watches me order the least classy item on the menu — either a burger or chicken fingers — because there's less chance of the kitchen staff fucking up a hamburger with nuts than them accidentally using a peanuty wok for my stir-fry. If the menu does not include a low-class, nut-free option, I will spend the entire date peeling the nut crust off the fancy bread, and scrutinizing the brown French onion soup that the waitress swears is nut free. Assuming I survive the meal, we'll wander home, and he'll suggest stopping for ice cream. I live for chocolate-chip cookie dough, but the "rinse the scoop in a peanut-filled tub of water" strategy of scoopers everywhere is a disaster. So I'll say that I'm full, and pray he orders something other than Rocky Road. As long as I'm separated from potential contamination by at least two degrees, I'm fine.

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Then there are the inevitable "lets cook dinner together" dates. Most anaphylactic reactions come not from the cook fucking up, but from contaminated store-bought ingredients: various powders and dried foods, or anything from the nuts-and-candy store. I insist on buying all ingredients myself, since I'm well versed in which companies' "May contain peanuts" labels mean that the food may contain peanuts, and which ones mean that the food doesn't contain nuts, but they don't want to get sued.

The confession is knocked out of me around date four, when Nutman invites me to a group dinner with his friends, usually at a Burmese or Malaysian restaurant, where I spend three hours eating plain white rice.

Either the people in the group will assume I have an eating disorder, or a table-wide discussion of my peanut allergy will ensue, followed by repeated apologies from whoever picked the restaurant. I opt for the former, and the women in the group subtly point at me and roll their eyes at each other. I would too. The men say awkward

things like, "Um, are you sure you don't want, like, real food?" I claim an upset stomach.

If our relationship makes it past this event, we end up in bed more than a few times, and fall into a routine that could stand to be spiced up. Unfortunately, for reasons that defy logic, peanuts are a common ingredient in many bedroom lubes and lotions. (They're also common in the nipple creams of breastfeeding women.) Thus a new colorful bottle appears, and I ruin the moment by turning on a light and squinting at the label, looking for the ingredients that mean peanuts, like "arachis." I have never had hives in private places, and I'd like to maintain that streak.

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Let's fast forward. I've dropped the nut bomb on Nutman, and he is, against all odds, falling madly in love with my nut-free self. We have the heavy-panting "let me show you what I like" conversations, shortly followed by the ever-sexy "Let me show you how to operate my Epi-Pen" discussion. That one concludes with, "FYI, I always keep two in my purse, right next to the emergency condom." I am the least sexy person ever to walk the earth.

From this point on, nuts are an embedded longevity test for Nutman. Whether or not he remembers that I'm allergic is a straight indication of whether he gives a shit. Passing the test usually involves cute gestures like his handing me a Valentine's Day stuffed animal and exclaiming, "And I read the tag to make sure it's not stuffed with peanut shells!" A few indications that Nutman's not passing the test: He repeatedly comes home with a grocery bag filled with foods I can't eat, or on weeknights, sits on the couch with a pile of menus, reeling off his preferences: Vietnamese, Indian, Chinese, Thai. I veto them all. I try to be comforting. "Not Thai, sweetie. Thai will really kill me. Indian will only be an ER trip."

Nutman offers, "How 'bout Cambodian?"

I toss him a bone, and we evaluate the peanut-crop potential of Cambodia. But in the end, I'm worried. I have a suggestion: "We could just not kiss anymore?"

Nutman orders in Japanese. I consider de-ordering Nutman.

Long-term monogamy doesn't make it easier. Living with me requires not only that Nutman commit to me, but also that he renounce all things nut. In the house, this means no peanut butter, no peanut foods. For Nutmen, this can be a problem. It also tends to lead to a lot of cheating, in the form of nooners. He'll come home, and I'll lean in for a hello kiss and say, "Hmmm, someone was out for Thai lunch with the boys again." He'll say, "How did you know?" Nutman, a woman always knows.

I suspect that no one reading this has ever said to their better half, "Sweetie, you need to go decontaminate yourself." That's the gentle line I use when my partner has strayed. Decontamination involves brushing, flossing and high-alcohol-content gargling, plus anti-bacterial skin scrubbing, and a change of clothes.

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Decontamination can create a bit of a relationship tightrope. For the next three hours or so, anything snarky that I say

will be returned with a tortured, "But Baby, I Just Decontaminated Myself For You!" look. He wins.

At the end of the night, my best Nutmen have been ad hoc peanut guardsmen, similar to how actresses' husbands protect them from paparazzi. The great Nutmen interrogate waiters, compulsively scan labels and email our friends to politely request Italian instead of Burmese. They relinquish peanuts from their lives, and have been known to dive across the room to knock a granola bar out of my lips, noting that the company just changed its ingredient list. Years after we break up, we'll meet for coffee, and they'll ask the waitress whether the tea biscuits have nuts in them.

The Nutmen who offer me a Reese's three times in a row, on the other hand, are welcome to enjoy many future evenings of peanut-butter bliss. Solo. n°