

# Should he or she pay the check? It is not as easy as it sounds

By **EVE GLICKSMAN**

It happened again. The waiter thanked my male companion and slipped him the check. I ignored the auto-pilot gesture that the decades have not undone and plopped down my credit card; it was my turn to pay. A few minutes later the waiter returned, handing the charge slip ... to my date.

This time, I offered a ladylike (remembering to smile) comment about making assumptions. My date became embarrassed and left an overly generous tip.

You see, the sticky wicket of "who pays?" has been resolved in politically correct theory, but not in the trenches. With sexual mores gone the way of Madonna, picking up the tab has become the last taboo for women.

Women's Lib be damned, old stereotypes and all-out confusion prevail when the check arrives. With a subtle twist on the "he-pays-for-dinner-she-cooks-it" concept, today's working woman offers to split the bill ... only her date's appeal plummets if he lets her. As for the man, most would rather buy dinner than be taken to task on equality should the issue of her feelings, or worse, housework ever arise.

Indeed, only 30 percent of men in a 1991 Mademoiselle survey expressed annoyance toward women who don't offer to share expenses on a first or second date. I know many a progressive man who marches in pro-choice rallies but doesn't feel he has a choice about paying. Not if he wants to see the woman again. Not if he wants to respect himself in the morning.

True, many of my sister singles insist that cheapness (i.e. the woman pays her share) is a fatal flaw in men. It's standard etiquette that the

man pay, they say. It's a romantic exchange that should not be confused with equal rights or complicated by who called whom. Why give up this one perk of femaledom when men don't mind, or at least they don't say anything?

So, the complicitous courtship custom continues with both men and women feeling they have the advantage: his right to be nurtured and her right to be supported. Until the power balance starts to teeter.

The notion that a gentleman is only too pleased to pay for the privilege of a woman's company is the popular myth. But does the man really think the woman's company is worth more than his? While he isn't trading arms for hostages, there may be ever-so fine strings attached to his gallantry.

Let's say the man is generous with theater tickets, champagne, weekend getaways. As the one who is making all this possible, he is in a position to set the terms for the relationship and make decisions about what they do and when.

The hidden cost of economic dependency could be that the woman always look young and spectacular ... and ignore her date's geriatric status or bulging middle. She may have to play rapt listener, comforter, ego-builder. Then, there's that seldom acknowledged link between sexual expectations and money down.

Still, why shouldn't men foot the bills considering that women have gotten the economic shaft for the last millennium or so? Less obvious is that when the man establishes himself as the provider during dating and the woman assumes the nurturing, these roles set the stage should the union last.

While women may feel adored now

by dates lavishing money on them, who is more likely 10 years from now to be holding a job and scrubbing the tub, shopping for slipcovers, and making the kids' Halloween costumes? Call it the "Wined, Dined and Fined Syndrome." What starts as dating etiquette evolves into a dubious division of labor in which working women pay twice over time — as providers and nurturers.

Perpetuating this scheme of things are routine assumptions that husbands, fathers or boyfriends pick up the bills; the woman's salary is for "extras." When I was being questioned for jury duty, for example, the judge asked a self-employed man if serving on a jury would be a financial hardship. While I also described myself as self-employed, I wasn't asked that.

What we have is social jetlag: a mid-air collision of '50s values and '90s politics. More than two decades after the sexual revolution, many men still feel their potency is judged by their spending prowess. Likewise, many women still question a man's desirability and feelings for her when he doesn't graciously "take care of her" on dates.

Economic logic has little to do with it. Even when the woman's income is higher than her date's, the man who allows her to pay is regarded as inadequate by male and female peers, as is the woman who doesn't cook for him.

Captions in women's magazines chronicle a bitter stalemate: "Pay your half, princess." "Taking it like a man — why the guy should pay for dinner," and "When my economic status fell, my relationships with women started to suffer."

What emerges from the dating thicket is a hostile mentality where singles evaluate each other by what that person provides for them — not who they are. Men become meal and status tickets; women, their showpieces and caregivers.

So let women pay 75 cents to the man's dollar on dates in deference to the wage gap. Or perhaps an amount proportional to their dates' salaries. (Tax returns required on first date.) But the woman should pay something — and she's much better off if it's money.

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## WORTH REPEATING ...

### What Holly has to look forward to

My daughter, Holly, born in 1968, has never known a time in her life when our government was not spending more than it took in. In 1974, when she came from Vietnam to the United States, the federal debt stood at \$480 billion. By the time she entered sixth grade, it was more than \$800 billion; when she graduated from high school, our nation's debt was \$2 trillion; at her college graduation, it was more than \$3 trillion; and on the night I cast my vote for the President's budget, it stood at \$4 trillion. On Dec. 13, 1993, at 9:30 a.m., our national debt stands at \$4 trillion, \$700 billion, \$725 million. By the

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