

let's dating

the friendstown to loverville express:

*how do you know
when it's time to get off?*

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If you've managed to overcome the confusion and befuddlement of the "first date" and you and your love interest are still speaking - congratulations. The good news is, you've made it past the first hurdle. The bad news? Your wild ride is just beginning.

How, exactly, do you make the transition from hand-shaking and friend-making to lip-locking and love-hotel-hopping? The answer is: there will be some sort of defining moment in which your relationship switches gears, though chances are it will not be at a time, place, or even in a manner that makes sense to you.

The first Japanese guy I ever "dated" will henceforth be referred to as SM, not for his tawdry tendencies, but for his "smooth maneuvering". SM made a valiant (but ultimately rejected) effort to get me to go home with him the first night we went out, but even after several months of hanging out in groups, going out *à deux*, and, yes, some sleepovers, he was still unwilling to refer to me as his girlfriend. Okay, technically he never outright refused to acknowledge our relationship, but he certainly earned his moniker for his ninja-like abilities to dodge the subject. Ultimately, our relationship came to an end when he texted me (yes, classy, I know) to let me know that he thought we'd be better off as friends. Had it not been for his break-up text, I might never have known that he considered us to be a couple in the first place!

On the other hand, there is my darling SC (surfing chef), who, on our second meeting, after having spent approximately 8 hours with me, asked me how I'd feel about being his girlfriend. To be completely honest, at the time I didn't know how I'd feel about being his girlfriend since I had yet to see him in the daylight (we met and had the aforementioned conversation on the dance floor of a nightclub) and didn't even know his last name. Yet, admiring his gumption and figuring I had nothing to lose, I gave him the green light. Four years down the road, we're still together, so he must have done something right.

Judging from friends' experiences, I'm not alone in my befuddlement. They've confirmed that making the leap from Friendstown to Loverville is a road fraught with peril and heartbreak - or at least a lot of stops at the WTF roundabout.

Part of this confusion is, of course, due to linguistic subtleties that simply get lost in

translation. With partners of the same cultural background, you can easily have very nuanced conversations that skirt around the issue, e.g. "I'm kind of into you and if you might be kind of into me, too, then maybe we could, you know, hang out, and see where this thing goes." But unless you or your partner is a seriously cunning linguist, you're probably going to find yourselves communicating in a language that one of you feels at least slightly uneasy speaking. This leads to all sorts of fun, ranging from the painfully blunt "Be my girlfriend" to the invitations that are so subtle you can't even recognize them as such. One Japanese male friend informed me that inviting a girl to an onsen was the same as telling her you wanted to sleep with her. There's no way I would have ever figured that one out on my own.

If it's any consolation, this predicament appears to be not exclusively a foreign-Japanese conundrum. One of my Japanese friends was seeing a Japanese guy for several months, spending all her free hanging out with him, and even going on mini-breaks around the country with the fellow in question. Yet, according to her, they were not yet an official "couple". Apparently the magic moment had not yet occurred, so even though they appeared to the casual observer to be dating, they had not yet settled the score between themselves. However, at some point he must have decided that it was time to make things "official" and from that point on she referred to him as her boyfriend. What was he waiting for? The proper alignment of the stars? The six-month mark? A trip to an onsen? I don't know, but apparently he did. These two are now engaged.

The timing, wording and setting may not be quite what you expect, but it has to be said that the Friendstown to Loverville Express is one wild ride. How you get a license, though, still remains a mystery.

Struggling in an interracial relationship? Need Melissa's advice? Send your problems to submit@japan-zine.com

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