

Love on New Year's Eve

Every year, as the number of days before New Year's Eve went down, Vernon Jacobs' anxiety level went up. It seemed to him that one's ultimate failure as a man would be to be without a date on New Year's Eve. Yet that had happened to him more often than not in the twenty or so years he had been old enough to date on New Year's Eve. Well, much more often than not. Actually there were only a handful of times that he had had a date, and those times hadn't turned out well at all.

Other nights that he was without a date, which was most nights, actually, he didn't feel so ... *exposed*. A strange word to use for a night he would sit at home alone watching the ball drop on TV, especially since it was opposed to going out to a crowded venue in front of hundreds of watching eyes. But exposed was how he felt, perhaps exposed to himself more than to anyone else. But if someone were to ask him, either before or after the big night, what his plans were or had been, what was he to say? That he was so unattractive, so socially inept, so much a coward, that he couldn't find a date even for this one night a year?

So each year he was motivated to scour the lists on several dating sites in search of someone – anyone – who would be willing to go out with him.

Not that he was ugly. Unattractive was probably the more accurate word. He had unfortunately inherited his mother's large, swollen face and his father's small, narrow eyes of a light-brownish, yellowish color, which made him look – at least he thought – untrustworthy. Large, soft lips, a small nose, prematurely thinning hair. A large, plump middle balanced on long, thin legs. Big hands and feet. The wrong sperm had entered the wrong egg. It was not a good combination of genes.

All of which made for a rather shy, uncertain demeanor when it came to approaching women, almost an assumption that he would be turned down. But with New Year's Eve less than two weeks away, he screwed up his courage and persevered. Four, five, six rather decisive negatives were like blows to the head at the start of a boxing match, but he continued to shuffle towards his opponent, prospect, date, whatever, as the blows kept coming.

The seventh prospect agreed to a video chat. Not at all attractive, but, hey, a female. At least she looked that way. Plump, if you could tell anything from her photo, with fat running to her face and neck. Granny glasses. Large brown eyes. Thick, somewhat flattish nose. Lisa.

“Hi,” she started out. He felt more comfortable immediately, liking that she had been the one to begin. Perhaps she was as desperate as he was. Perhaps more.

“Hi,” he answered. “Sorry for the short notice. My date just bailed out on me.”

“No problem,” she said. “I don't have a date yet.”

What was the matter with him? Why had he felt the need to lie to her? Vernon mentally kicked himself. She seemed perfectly OK with her situation. Why hadn't he been with his?

"Would you like to go out with me?"

"Maybe. Let's chat a little first. Where were you thinking of going?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"I mean, you must have had plans with that date who cancelled."

Damn! He thought. Damn, damn, damn!

"We were just going to go to dinner, then watch the ball drop at my place."

"Dinner sounds fine. Where were you going to go?"

"What kind of food do you like?"

"Pretty much all kinds. I know it's pretty late to get a reservation. Wherever you were going to take your date would be fine."

"Gee," he lied again. "I cancelled that reservation. But if you would want to go out with me, I'll make another one and let you know. Is it a date?"

"Hey, not so fast!" she laughed. "I need to get to know you."

"You can read my bio."

"We need to talk some more."

"We can talk over dinner."

She laughed again, shaking her head. "You're persistent," she said. "I like that."

"Then it's a date," he said. On the edge of success, he was not about to back down.

"It's a date," she agreed. "But only dinner. I'm not ready to watch the ball drop at your place."

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

Right after the video chat he clicked back on her bio. He had been searching for females, not people. Now he was curious about the person. Lisa Caverly. Ethnicity left blank. Age left blank. Mid-thirties, he guessed, maybe a few years younger than him. Occupation: Therapist. Therapist? Uh-oh! What kind of therapist? Didn't say. Ph.D. in social work. Oh, boy! He was in for it!

At least he had a college degree. In business. Not that it had done him much good. He was a salesman at a small store that sold medical equipment – things like crutches and toilet seats with lift bars and sitz baths and the like. It was the kind of job one would just settle for, not terribly well paying, not terribly demanding, in a family business where one was not quite treated as family. It had been his first job out of college, and he had never looked for another.

He wondered what a Ph.D. in social work would make of him. Maybe this date was not such a good idea.

He was lucky to find a reservation at a neighborhood Italian place. No music or dancing, but they said they would come out with hats and noisemakers at midnight. And a free glass of champagne. So he made the reservation for 10:30, figuring that since she had nixed going over to his place, they would just about have finished eating when the ball dropped.

“I got a reservation,” he told her. They were on cell phones now. “10:30. At midnight they come out with hats and noisemakers and a free glass of champagne.” He winced as he said the word “free.” “Does that sound OK?”

“Sounds good,” she said. “I’m looking forward to it, Vernon.” His name sounded intimate in her voice. He felt a pleasant bit of chill trickle down his neck. “Where is it?”

He gave her the address in Brooklyn. “Near my place,” he said.

“I’m not coming up to your place.”

“Of course, of course,” he said. “Should I pick you up?”

“No,” she said. “I’ll meet you there. 10:30.”

And there she was at 10:30, dressed in a businesslike, creamy-white pants suit, low heels, a pearl necklace and earrings, nothing but lipstick on her plump, fleshy face. His New Year’s Eve date. Big, wide hips, fat legs, large breasts, an ample rump, all of which were on full display in the tailored suit.

Vernon got up as she came to the table. “Hi,” she said, again taking the initiative. “Hi,” he answered.

They shook hands awkwardly before they sat down.

“This looks like a nice place,” she said. “Thank you for arranging this. My luck that your first date cancelled.”

What he should have said was, “My luck, too,” but he thought of it too late as she went on.

“I’m not crazy about being alone on New Year’s Eve. It’s a night when you’re supposed to be with someone special. Don’t you think?”

He nodded, tongue-tied. She seemed so self-assured, not at all embarrassed to be in precisely the position he had felt the need to lie about.

“I mean, there’s nothing wrong with being alone on New Year’s Eve. But it’s a lot nicer to be with someone. I’m so glad we chatted. I didn’t want to be alone.”

Again, he said nothing. This was torture. Why had he lied? Was this going to go on for the entire evening?

She sighed. “I guess we should look at the menu. What are you going to get?”

He looked at the menu. “There’s something I have to tell you before this can go any further,” he blurted out, sorry he had said it as soon as it floated out over the table between them.

“What is that?” she said, looking at him with what seemed more like curiosity than alarm.

“I never had a date for New Year’s Eve. I was embarrassed to be looking for a date so late and so I made it up.”

He couldn’t look at her as he said this, so he had no idea how she was reacting to it. Ruined it again! he thought, staring at the empty wine glass in front of him.

“That took courage!” she said. “Thank you for trusting me with that.”

She was smiling at him, a gentle smile that looked lovely, even on her plump, fleshy face, and he felt himself melting into it.

“I’m embarrassed!” he said. “Really. I like to think I’m an honest person.”

“Everyone tells lies,” she said. “Not everyone admits to them.”

“Lisa,” he said, calling her by her name for the first time. “Thank you for being so understanding. I feel so ...”

“Free,” she supplied.

“I was going to say stupid. But yes, you’re right. Free.”

“I mean that now that the lie has been pushed out of the way we can be free to talk. You had seemed so ... tied up inside. I want to get to know you. But first I think we’d better order our food. Don’t you think?”

Again, she was driving, in control, and he was the passenger. Since he was the man, he wasn't sure he liked the dynamic. On all his other – disastrous -- dates, the women deferred to him, which to his mind was the way it should be. But surprisingly he liked the way she relieved him of the responsibility for the evening. He liked the little, “Don't you think” after each time she took charge. It was the first time he had been on a first date (the only kind of date he knew) that he felt comfortable and unafraid.

As they ate their gnocchi pesto, occasionally they looked up and smiled at each other, like a couple that no longer needed to say anything. But when they had finished the first course, and each taken another sip of the chianti he had ordered, Lisa said, “And now we should find out a little more about each other, don't you think?”

Again, taking over. Steering the evening. But with capable, and most important to Vernon, sympathetic hands.

“I'm an only child,” he began. “I have a business degree from City U. I'm a salesman in a medical supply store. What else?”

“Good start!” she said. “I've got a brother and two sisters. A Ph.D. in social work from NYU. I'm a therapist in private practice. Does that scare you off?”

“No,” he said.

“Now you're not telling me the truth.”

“Yes,” he said. “I don't know how that will work out. I've never had therapy.”

“And you won't now,” she laughed. “This isn't therapy. This is ... I hope friendship.”

“I hope so, too,” he said quickly, amazed how easy he had found it to say the right thing. Usually the right words came to him just after the ship had left the dock or the train had left the station.

The main courses came, but unlike during the first course, they continued to talk.

“What are you looking for in life?” she asked him abruptly.

“I don't know,” he said. He laughed a little nervously. “That's a big question.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “It's a big question. I don't think anyone has an answer just off the bat. But what do you think? What comes to your mind?”

He shrugged. She seemed genuinely interested.

“I want a family,” he said. Which was true, he thought. The question had opened up something in him that his thoughts were racing through. “I don't care so much about my job or a career. That's just to make enough money for my family. I want to love someone who loves me.”

“Beautiful!” she said.

“And I want children and grandchildren. I don’t want to be so alone anymore.”

“Yes, yes!” she said, nodding.

“Your turn,” he said.

“We’re very different,” she began, finishing her glass of chianti. The dinner plates had just been taken away. It was 11:30. “I love my work. I love healing people, opening inner doors for them, alleviating pain. I’m fascinated by the science of it, the art of it. I’ve never been that interested in the money I make from it. It’s nice, but it’s not why I do it.”

“Don’t you want a family?” he asked. He couldn’t help sounding disappointed.

“Yes,” she said. “I would like one. But I’m not sure how I could make room for one in my busy life.” She laughed. “I guess I would need a house-husband.”

“But would you respect him?” Vernon asked, amazed at how deep the conversation had so quickly become. Perhaps too deep for a novice swimmer like him.

Her turn to pause. “I don’t know,” she said. “That’s an excellent question. I would hope so.”

“I would, too,” he said. Things suddenly turned dark. They ordered dessert awkwardly and waited for it without saying much, watching the little paper boat carrying all their hopes and dreams approach a waterfall that would smash it against reality.

“You’re right about our being very different,” he finally said, surprising himself by taking the initiative. “But sometimes opposites attract.”

“And we do have a lot in common,” she added quickly. “Look. Neither of us is particularly attractive, in a conventional way, and both of us were afraid we might have to spend New Year’s Eve alone. And we’re both happy to have found someone to be with.”

“I’m very happy to have found you,” he said. Again the right words at the right time. Perhaps because he meant them.

She blushed.

“No, really. You have a beautiful smile. I feel at home with you.”

“What a lovely thing to say,” she said quietly, clearly moved by it.

“It’s true. I’ve never had the courage to say that to a woman before. I mean, actually, I’ve never thought it.”

“I’ve never had it said to me,” she said. She took his hand and kissed it, and suddenly he wanted her like he had never wanted anything before.

The dessert came, but they let it sit there, reluctant to stop holding hands.

“This is happening too fast,” she finally said, letting go of his hand. “Let’s have our dessert.” And she gave a little laugh, as though to soften her breaking it off.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I don’t want to rush you.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either,” she said, reaching out to give his hand a squeeze.

“You won’t,” he said.

And then she kissed him on the mouth, moving her tongue against his, and broke off again laughing. “Look at me!” she said. “Totally out of control. Vernon, Vern, what should I call you?”

“Both,” he said. “Depending.”

The waiters were going from table to table pouring the champagne, handing out hats and noisemakers. 11:55.

“I’ll call you both, then. Vernon, Vern, I love your name.”

She took a bright orange conical cap and put it on his head.

“Your name is easy,” he said. “Lisa. It’s not short for anything, is it?”

She shook her head no, smiling.

“Lisa, Lisa,” he said softly, almost singing it. “I love your name, too.”

Suddenly it was midnight, the restaurant loudspeaker started play Auld Lang Syne and the noisemakers went off around the tables.

“Happy New Year!” Vernon said, raising his glass of champagne.

“Happy New Year!” Lisa answered.

And they kissed again, holding their full glasses of champagne away from their bodies, reluctant to stop, not knowing how to stop, not wanting to be the one to stop, as Vernon thought that years from now, in retrospect, this might seem the most significant moment of his life.