



“Come here often, good lookin’?” (*ahOOgah, ahOOgah, Dive, Dive!*)

Award winning thriller and crime novelist Harlan Coben unleashed a chilling corker that plumbs the depths of online dating when he published “Missing You” (New York: Signet, 2015). The schemes, pandering and horrors of electronic matchmaking ooze creepily from every page as one begins to fear that for every date up for grabs there are a half dozen nuts (or far worse) competing for it:

“Thirty-one bodies had so far been dug up at the farm . . . Most had died of gunshot wounds to the head . . . The media came up with all kinds of terrible headlines. CLUB DEAD. THE DATE FROM HELL. DOA CUPID. WORST DATE EVER. None was funny. None reflected the pure, undiluted horror of that farm.”

Turning from fiction to actual *dat-a*, Pew Research Center recently compiled key facts about online dating, which some 15% of American adults participate in. Perhaps most important, online dating is no longer stigmatized, as a majority (59%) of U.S. adults agree that it’s a good way to meet people while only 23% believe that participants are “desperate.” Even more stunning, use of mobile dating apps or online dating sites by young adults—those under 25—has nearly *tripled* in just the past two years. The rate has doubled among those 55-64 so near-seniors are also catching the e-dating bug.

Written by Jack Sparacino
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Real dating, not just browsing, has also increased. Two thirds of online daters say they have gone on an actual date with someone they ‘met’ through a dating site or app, up from 43% in 2005. And how about this for a headline – a scant 5% of Americans in a marriage or committed relationship say they met their significant other online. Compare that with the nearly 50M Americans who have tried online dating. For reference, there are 23.6M and 16.5M Match.com and eHarmony members, respectively. Final stat for now: online and offline dating remain potentially very different processes, as courtships for marriages that began offline last more than twice as long as comparable online-initiated courtships (42 vs. 18.5 months). Jane and I courted for about that 18.5 months in the early 80’s and we had never even *heard* of online dating back then. Maybe we were on to something.

Why such high online participation rates but such a low “success” rate (5%) if we equate marriage/commitment with success, which seems reasonable? Maybe, as I alluded to in an earlier column, it’s because men often aren’t always as intuitive or capable as women or may overrate themselves. Aghealth.com reports that women are turned off by being ignored, “wannabe bigshots,” self-admiration (hi, Donald!), “straight up chauvinism” (yo, Donnie!), boorish behavior and bad pickup lines among other things. I don’t read every issue of *Cosmopolitan* or otherwise scour ladies magazines, but I’ve seen similar turn-off lists elsewhere. And given the flip side advice on how to attract women found in male focused magazines, men can hardly plead that they are justifiably ignorant of what women look for in a relationship.

For the dating wonks out there, more scholarly writings on dating are also available. Moira Weigel, a Yale doctoral candidate, for example, just published “Labor of Love” (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016) in which she argues that after enduring many decades of attack, modern dating is indeed alive and well. “Reports of the death of dating [have] been greatly exaggerated.”

Perhaps best of all, Weigel’s tome has been described as “hilarious.” Come to think of it, that is precisely how many people would probably describe some of their first dates, especially the ones with nutty aspirants.

There must indeed be something inherently enticing and gratifying in dating as even us staid social scientists have dipped our toes into its frothy waters. Jane and I met at work waaaaaaaay back in 1982 when a famously, very happily married fellow named Ronald Reagan was president. We were in different chains of command, thankfully, but felt obligated to tread carefully. Not only because we wanted to protect our careers but because we were both divorced and had no particular desire to get back into a committed relationship—especially if it involved marriage. But the mutual attraction was there. What to do?

Dates and Nuts

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I'll never forget walking by Jane's office one day while she was holding a staff meeting. Door open, master scheduler Pat Long and Jane's eager department heads were clearly 'engaged' in their work. The intensity was palpable as occasional bursts of laughter wafted up the hall. As junior little new-hire *moi* approached her door, Jane called out, "Hey, Jack, what do you do for fun?" I answered with the first thing that came to mind. "I whittle." This was greeted by a momentary wall of silence as the group considered whether I could have been serious. When the goofy gag became apparent, they laughed. With me, not at me, I've always hoped. In any case, the gate had slowly opened and Jane and I danced around the idea of going out together socially.

Fortunately, the Stamford area offered lots of opportunities to share some pleasant time in comfortable surroundings. We opted for dinner at a seafood place in nearby Norwalk called "The Lighthouse." Heaven knows exactly what we talked about, but Jane was pretty and charming and the conversation delightful. The wine we shared hit the spot as a half dozen tanks of brightly colored tropical fish looked on serenely. Fittingly, we were hooked and in fact went on to date and fish together frequently. As a testament to offline dating's many enduring advantages, we had a ball and filled many a bucket with delicious seafood dinners.

Like many naive suitors, however, I actually believed that Jane liked to fish as opposed to simply spending time with me. This mistake came crashing home after she seemed strangely disappointed when I bought her a spiffy tackle box for her birthday. Gee whiz, how could that have possibly gone wrong? The lack of pre-dating profiles? Did she think I was some kind of fishing nut? (Well, now that you mention it . . .)

One of many dating curiosities is that everyone – and practically no one – is really an expert. Grammy award winning singer Alanis Morissette offered several do's and don'ts in *Glamour* magazine recently. Don't talk about your exes, she warns, or overstay your welcome—sticking with a date for more than three hours. That scarcely allows for dinner and a movie, though, does it? My favorite "do" of Morissette's is "let go and have fun. . . One day you will have some great stories to tell."

When you get right down to it, isn't that what life is really all about? Moving from thought to thought, experience to experience, date to date . . . even when it's with the same lady who has put up with your fishing (and other) passions for nearly 35 years? A life well lived, dotted by however many dates and nuts fall from the trees, should generate lots of fun. And great stories.

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Once upon a time, there was a young whittler named Jack . . .