

One Thing in Common

by Gary D. Cannon

I hate first dates.

I hated them before the quarantine, and they sure can't be better now.

You never know if you'll have anything to talk about together. My friends say it's easy: "Just find one thing in common, then go from there." Easy for them, maybe. And maybe easy in real life at a restaurant or a coffee shop. But half a continent away, in two little boxes on a computer screen? This is no way for dating. Not that I dated much before.

Is this blouse too formal? Maybe too much lace. I don't know why I even bother with the skirt and hose and heels, since I won't be standing up. And makeup? I haven't worn makeup since my last first date, and that was over a year ago! But a date's a date, right? It's like a job interview: dress for the role you want. Though I don't even know what I'm looking for.

Why did I even ask Christine for this guy's contact info? I see him at a virtual birthday party, he's one face among thirty, and I think he's cute, so I ask our mutual friend if he's single? That's not me. I hardly even know Christine, for that matter—we've only been working in the same company for three months. But I'm trying to make new friends since moving to San Francisco, trying to be ready for when the quarantine is lifted.

Hey! Han! No more barking tonight, okay? You know you have to stay in your kennel for a bit. Don't worry, pooch, it'll probably just be half an hour. Good boy, have some treats. Good boy. I have to go check on dinner.

Ugh. First dates are the worst.

What was I thinking—searing a steak? He'll be watching me chew the whole time. I should have just made pasta. No time for that now... but I can heat some soup. That'll do. I'll have the steak after the date. Three years of French cooking

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Is wearing a tie too formal? And white dress shirt? I don't know why I even bother with the slacks and dress shoes, since I won't be standing up. And gel in my hair? I haven't put gel in my hair since my last first date, and that was almost two years ago! But a date's a date, right? It's like a job interview: dress for the role you want. Though I don't even know what I'm looking for.

Why did I even ask Christine for this girl's contact info? I see her at a virtual birthday party, she's just one face among thirty, and I think she's cute, so I ask our mutual friend if she's single? That's not me. I hardly even know Christine, for that matter—we haven't seen each other since high school. But then I sit on the couch with the dog and go through old photo albums and scrapbooks and get nostalgic, and connect on social media.

Hey! Leia, quit barking, honey. I'm sorry, but I'm going to leave you in the bedroom for a while. Don't worry, pooch, it'll probably just be half an hour. Good girl, have some treats. Good girl. I have to go check on dinner.

Ugh. First dates are the worst.

What was I thinking—pasta with a red sauce? I'll probably splash it all over my shirt. I should have just seared a steak. Too late to change now... but I can throw together a salad. That'll do. The pasta will reheat. Four statewide cooking

classes, and I'm making soup. It's embarrassing. Anyway, crisis averted.

Now the background. At least I moved the unpacked boxes from behind me. The wall's a bit bare, though. Is there anything at all I could put there? How about my life-size cut-outs of Kirk and Picard—that would be a lark! No, a blank wall is better than a nerdy wall.

Okay, the soup is coming along. Time to breathe. Get some fresh air on the balcony. Though the bicycle takes up most of the space. I wonder if I can do some cycling out to the redwoods this weekend. Get some fresh air.

Why am I so stressed about this? He's got to be better than the last guy I dated. Wow, that feels... so long ago. I guess social media is fine to make some new friends. But... it's still tough, living alone. At least I have Han for company.

Really, all I want is someone who is kind.

Someone thoughtful. Who likes silly Hallmark cards. Someone who really invests energy in our time together. Who keeps a box of our mementos.

Is there anyone like that even left in the world?

And they have to love dogs.

Oh no, it's almost time.

Okay, soup in the bowl... pouring the wine... a few more treats for Han... check the hair... and the blouse.....

And, sitting down. All that's left is to click the link. What if he gave me a fake link? Or what if he doesn't click to grant access? I've been stood up before. At least then I could eat the steak. And take off the heels. And watch Star Trek while cuddling with the dog.

Okay, here goes.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

"I've been really looking forward to this."

"I've heard so much about you."

Seriously? The first thing I say is a lie? What a start.

awards, and I'm making a salad. It's ridiculous. Anyway, crisis averted.

Now the background. Bookshelves. That's classy, right? Maybe move the complete Star Trek DVD collection somewhere else, though. Now what else can I put in this spot? A plant? No, I don't have a plant. Lego Starship Enterprise? No, a blank shelf is better than a nerdy shelf.

Okay, the salad's chopped and in a bowl. Time to breathe. I wish I could get some fresh air. These crowded apartments. Oh, to hike or bike out in nature! Fields, mountains, woods, anything. There's no nature here in Chicago.

Why am I so stressed about this? She's got to be better than the last girl I dated. Wow, that feels... so long ago. I guess social media is fine to make some new friends. But... it's still tough, living alone. At least I have Leia for company.

Really, all I want is someone who is kind.

Someone thoughtful. Who likes trinkets and random gifts. Someone who really invests energy in our time together. Who keeps a scrapbook of our memories.

Is there anyone like that even left in the world?

And they have to love dogs.

Oh no, it's almost time.

Okay, salad on the plate... pouring the wine... a few more treats for Leia... check the hair... and the tie.....

And, sitting down. All that's left is to click the link. What if she decides not to come? What if she doesn't click the link to join? I've been stood up before. At least then I could eat the pasta. And take off the tie. And watch Star Trek while cuddling with the dog.

Okay, here goes.

Seriously? The first thing I say is a lie? What a start.

She continued after an awkward pause, “How’s the weather in Chicago?”

“Not bad. A bit drizzly. Out there?”

“Foggy this morning. But it burned off.”

Just like every day in San Francisco this time of year. Boring.

Drizzly. The most dull we get in Chicago. Like me right now.

He proceeded, “So, how do you know Christine?”

“Work. I just started working in the same company as her a couple of months ago. You?”

“I knew her in high school.”

“Wow! Old friend!”

“Sort of. I only went to that school for a year. But it seems everyone’s connected on social media.”

“She *did* cast a wide net for her birthday party.”

“Yeah.... Yeah.”

Another pause.

They sipped their respective glasses of wine.

“So, what are we having for dinner?” he asked.

She looked down at her bowl. “Um... soup. Tomato soup.”

“Sounds good!” he lied. “The waiters here are serving...”—he regarded his plate—“a green salad.”

Ugh. I can’t even say it’s my favorite soup. I can’t say anything interesting at all! There aren’t even croutons! It’s not fancy like a bisque. It’s just... tomato.

Ugh. Just lettuce, a couple of chopped vegetables, and a bland dressing. There aren’t even croutons! The most boring food I could have made.

She tried to salvage the conversation. “So, tell me about yourself. What do you do?”

“I’m a dental hygienist.”

“Well, you have excellent teeth,” she said.

Both of them were suddenly aware that he hadn’t hardly displayed a single tooth, certainly not through smiles or laughter. Then again, neither had she.

“How about you?” he asked.

“Um... I think my teeth are okay.”

If only I had meant it as a joke. Maybe I can play it off as funny.
Or maybe the moment has passed.

Was she joking? Maybe I should laugh to keep it light.
Or maybe the moment has passed.

“No, I meant... what do you do? In your company?”

“Oh! I’m a tax accountant.”

“Well, you have excellent... taxes.”

They both reached for their wine glasses and took a sip. More like a gulp. Or three.

Worst. Date. Ever.

Worst. Date. Ever.

He awkwardly hazarded another question. “What are you drinking?”

“Just a merlot.”

He pulled his bottle into view. “No kidding? Me too.” The bottle’s label showed, in sepia tones, a gnarled iron gate, with the figures of two doves, their beaks meeting at the center. It was called Dove Gates. “It’s hard to find, but I snap it up whenever I can. I’m not an alcoholic, I just... like this wine.”

She smiled warmly and laughed in relief. Without a word, she revealed her own bottle: the very same vintage of Dove Gates merlot. “I have two more bottles right over there, in storage. You never know when you’ll find it.”

“Exactly! There should be more distributors for these great smaller labels.”

“That’s what I was telling my friend last week. All the same big labels are everywhere, but there’s so much else out there. You can find some wonderful things if you just... try something new.”

A shared introspective pause.

He said, with relaxed geniality, “So... tell me more about yourself.”