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Was I horsing around? Neigh.

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—We who live in the country occasionally socialize, even with each other.

Parties for me tend to be stressful, what with the need for simultaneous thinking and talking. As a party person, I would give myself a D+. But I didn't think I was losing ground until last weekend.

I once hung out with a woman who was a weak D-. She was so socially inept that she had to memorize at least a dozen conversation topics before she went on a date. In comparison, I was a one-winged butterfly to her one-legged caterpillar.

As long as I stick to recent weather conditions -- like Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady" and don't root for Dover to move his bloomin' art work -- I might pass for a weak C at most social functions. But things got dicey fast when my wife, Melissa, decided to tack me up for a soiree with her friends in our local horsey set.

Now, I don't dislike horses. I like watching them run and play—on a neighbor's farm. And I don't dislike horse people. I like watching them run and play too.

Still, a horse, I have learned, is more bother than a vintage wooden sailboat docked in Afghanistan. Healthy horses are hideously expensive to maintain, and no horse is ever healthy for long. Horses go through shoes faster than Imelda Marcos.

In their defense, I admit that horses are pretty. And I can honestly say that I would rather sit on a horse for 24 hours in a rain storm than spend 2.4 seconds in the same room with Joan Rivers.

Over the years, I have made peace with the idea that Melissa is horsey, and her best friends are horsey, and all conversation among horsey people is about horsey thises and horsey thats.

For this reason, I retreat into semi-conscious nodding when conversation drifts into hoof mechanics or the existential qualities of the 100-foot-long equine gut.

I was not looking forward to standing around like a floor lamp amid these horse-passionate women.

“Melissa,” I whined, “I have come down with navicular pain in both hoofs. I am foundered with angst. I can’t go.”

“Tex, honey. You need to cowboy up,” she replied.

“What will I say when you women fort up like musk ox and begin to debate the merits of different gelding methods?”

“Don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Give me a crutch. Just one question I can ask if someone is so foolish as to talk with me.”

“You can ask, ‘Have you been riding much in this cold weather?’ Then just nod along at your usual gait.”

I wrote it down on my forearm, like NFL quarterbacks who can’t remember their plays.

The gracious hostess welcomed us into her home. Horses pranced in oil and reared in bronze. I noticed that several husbands came in with personalized halters.

Melissa quickly joined a four-woman defensive line and shooed me toward the food.

Foreign meatballs bobbed in a fragrant cauldron above an open flame. Many looked undocumented.

I chose a foot-long toothpick with a festive red-plastic hairdo and tried spearing them as they maneuvered like a school of sardines. Fifteen minutes later, I was swearing at Swedish cuisine and the low-life Viking who had invented the floating meatball.

Just then a Mercedes GL-Class SUV pulled in next to me. Her hubs were locked, and she was in very low four-wheel drive. She had a triple Martini in one hand and a full two-gallon pitcher in the other. She wore a well-dented black riding helmet and looked like Daryl Hannah in spurs.

“You’re cute,” she said.

“Are you talking to me?” I asked in genuine bewilderment. I haven’t been cute for at least 40 years. My first guess was that she had been addressing the floral centerpiece—a horse made of Costa Rican orchids.

“Are you Saddlebred by any chance?” she asked. Then she drained the pitcher.

I gave this question some thought. “I think I was conceived conventionally. But I never thought to ask.”

She looked at me a little strangely. “I’m a jumper,” she said.

“I used to jog.”

“You’re funny. You look like you’re in a hunt?”

“I do? Well, I have been stalking these free-range meatballs. I assumed they were for eating, not table decoration.”

“Did you try the ladle?” she asked, pointing to the silver implement.

“Oh, right. But that would take the sport out of it.”

“I bet you’re a walk-trot guy.” She batted a few things at me that created a breeze.

I lowered my eyes in false modesty. “I have two gaits, maybe three.” I may be nerdy, but I know about inter-gender repartee—if that’s what she was getting at, which I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to seem dense.

She balanced the empty pitcher on her upturned nose. “English or western?”

I was lost again. “I hadn’t realized that ‘western’ was an alternative to the mother tongue.”

“Do you show?”

“I hope not.” I got the feeling that I was holding my end of the conversation down, not up.

She brushed my arm. “Didn’t I see you on that nice Walker down at the Tennessee Nationals?”

“I don’t need one quite yet.”

“Quit teasing.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a flask the size of a rain barrel. “You’re thilly.” She patted my shoulder and breathed soulfully into my ear.

I looked quickly at my arm for an audible. “Have you been hiding much in

this bold weather?"

"Me? Hide?"

"Yeah, it was a foolish question."

She eyed me from nose to tail. "You dress down. I like that in our crowd. I'm never brave enough to do it."

"Oh, I've been brave a long time. These white socks are from the 10th grade. You dress very...nicely."

"Do you like this outfit?" She twirled herself, then clicked her spurs in a way that made sparks. She swirled her Martini "hypnautically" and rubbed her sleeve against my cheek.

"Dacron's very fashionable," I said.

"It's thilk, thilly." She was now in full flap. I felt the gusts. "I like a guy with a sense of humor. It completes me."

I started backing into the cheese dip, holding the toothpick like a switchblade. "I have other senses, too...."

"Most do."

"...like commonsense and even horse sense."

"Didn't we meet last winter at the Florida sale?"

"Maybe." (I haven't been to Florida in four decades.)

"Didn't you have that Bloody-Mary-red Lamborghini?"

"I often trick it out as a Ford pickup."

"I thought so. What's your name again?"

"IT'S MEATBALL!" Melissa said, reining to a stop in full lather.

"THE ROCK THINGER. I knew I'd seen you somewhere!"

I turned to Melissa. "Madam, have you been riding much in this cold weather?"

"Tex, honey," she said, "in this crowd, you ain't goin' get a boot in the stirrup

with that lame line.”

I nodded.

All’s well that whinnies well.

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