

Help! I need somebody

How to go to a party on your own, by Violet Henderson – the previously shy social editor of Tatler

No one would have been more surprised than my teenage self by my current job as social editor of *Tatler*.

I was the very opposite of social. I was shy. Toe-curlingly, nail-bitingly shy. When I went to parties, I did so in body only. Inside my head, the noise from my multiple personalities – yelling ‘Retreat!’, ‘Run!’, ‘Avoid eye contact!’ – was deafening. Until my American aunt (always the most popular person at a party) told me to stop looking as though I was in pain and begin smiling. Then I got myself a fringe and the mask was complete. Suddenly, get-togethers became doable and then, incrementally, enjoyable. Once I started, I was off. I could do (and did) parties in nightclubs, parties in houses, parties in swanky lofts, parties in sordid basements and parties in fancy dress. Mine is a cautionary tale, however. I got too big for my dancing boots. And when I signed on the dotted line for this job, which sporadically requires me to go to parties on my own, I forgot that – deep down – I’m much more Piglet than Tigger.

The first party I attended on my tod was at the V&A, which, lovely though it is by day, can be ghoulishly intimidating by night. I raked the crowd looking for a friendly face. I held my phone aloft for all to see, like a lifebelt or a little picket sign reading ‘I do have friends and their numbers are stored on this here mobile.’

From a dark corner, I called my best friend, who talked in rousing clichés that included ‘Life is what you make of it’ and, more unusually, ‘Carpe diem, sista.’ She thought a cocktail



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TACTIC Avoid being the lonely drunk.



Violet Henderson tries to make friends with total stranger Tom Quick

STRATEGY Beg, borrow or steal the guest list and do some background research – you’ll have a whole pot of spontaneous opening gambits.

She stooped down, bristling with irritation. ‘I think it’s so...’ she paused, before she spat ‘...inappropriate to ask me to talk about myself when we’re all here to support a charity.’ I went to the loos to cry and a blonde lady from *Holby City* was incredibly nice to me.

These days I’m a little wiser. Looking like you’d rather be anywhere else in the world than where you actually are is never going to win you friends. Neither is accosting a vaguely famous person while they are in full conversational flow. Nor is being the lonely drunk. PR girl Astrid Harbord says that when she finds herself at an event where she’s flying solo, she ‘downs the Rescue Remedy.’ But remember that this

apparently innocuous liquid is actually brandy.

Saying hello to the host is polite but also cunning. Take a moment to imagine the felicity of an introduction from that sweet, thoughtful party provider to their nearby friend, who then introduces you to another, and so on. Yes, you may be the object of a round of social pass-the-parcel, but you should focus on the fact that, for a whole

10 minutes, you’re not alone. And remember – because, in champagne-fuelled situations, this will be relevant – that however bad the halitosis you encounter, social isolation is worse.

Partying on your own cannot be a successful ad hoc pursuit. It needs to be planned. Beg, borrow or steal that guest list, because then you have information – and knowledge is power. In private (remember to delete your browser history afterwards), do some background research and you’ll have yourself a whole pot of apparently spontaneous opening gambits: ‘Susanna? It is Susanna, isn’t it? Because I think

might help. A bottle of champagne later, I spied Michael Heseltine. I quite forgot he was a ferocious parliamentarian. I saw only his avuncular bushy eyebrows. I heard only my editor congratulating me on eliciting from him such a brilliant, funny quote. As is the way with shock victims, I cannot now fully recollect what he roared back at me. But it was savage enough to send me ricocheting away from him and into a passing underfed model.

I live with a nervous stutter, but I surprised even myself with how long it took me to ask the spindly little beauty how her evening was going. She was much taller than me.

PHOTOGRAPHS: REX FEATURES, DAFYDD JONES

we met last year, just after Ascot and before your company floated'. If you are good at lying, this will be a stroll in the pleasure ground.

The crux of the issue is that whoever you are and however you look, if you are alone you are the least cool person at the party.

Writer Charles Glass isn't deterred, though. Instead, he's built a socialising-solo strategy to eclipse the problem: 'If it's a wedding you find yourself alone at, the best policy is to pretend to be the secret ex-husband of the bride. No one will mention it to her or the groom and you can attract an audience by telling them what she was like in bed. The women who hate her will surely be free later. For funerals, there are equivalent strategies.'

The problem of what to wear to a party becomes 10 times more important when you want to ingratiate yourself with total strangers. An outrageous costume is always a good conversation starter, but you do have to be a special type of person to pull it off. Nightclub entrepreneur Guy Pelly once turned up to a party where he didn't know many people, having misread the dress code of 'black tie with feathers' simply as 'feathers'. 'Amid this sea of dinner jackets, I was dressed as a chicken,' Guy recalls. 'It was initially a bit embarrassing but I made lots of new friends and, at the end of the night, I had a bit of fun by climbing on top of the marquee and going to roost.'

Should you lack Guy's confidence and charm and also happen to be a woman, tread carefully. Resist the temptation to wear a dress that signals you are happy to substitute polite conversation for a grope. If you are the hottest girl in the room, the other women will hate you and it's more than likely that the man at the end of that friendly hand has come with a harem of women (a girlfriend, the girlfriend's best friend, her sister, etc) who will exact their spiteful revenge upon you for the rest of the evening. Or, if they can, for the rest of your natural life.

Ultimately, your pep talk to yourself should say this: for whatever reason, you've clearly got to go to this party, and since you've gone to the bother of losing sleep, paying for your cab fare and going to the hairdresser, why waste it? Pray it's not a buffet – a *placement* is your friend. Set your phone to silent so that, when you make a fake call, it won't humiliate you with a noisy ring midway through. And try to think laterally, like architect Tchaik Chassay: 'Girls love dancing, so go to dance classes, fellas.' Tchaik did it and he never looked back.

One last little anecdote of warning. Before you head to the loo to rest your dear unloved head on the loo-roll dispenser, assess the lock on the door. I once didn't – and found myself trapped in a subterranean cubicle without mobile reception. A few hours later, a crowd had finally grouped outside the door. 'Who's in there?' they cried. 'Violet!' I shouted back. And then I heard the devastating words: 'Does anyone know who Violet is?' □

Quentin Letts's sketchbook

This month: Conservative MP for North-East Somerset **Jacob Rees-Mogg**

JACOB Rees-Mogg, 43 going on 70, always sits in the same place in the House of Commons. He favours one of the benches most distant from the ministerial despatch box, right at the end of the row. Mogglet (his father William is a peer and former *Times* editor) does not so much sit there as recline, legs crossed, his elbow on the armrest and his right hand cupping his long hockey stick of a chin. He could be a man relaxing in a garden chair on a drowsy Sunday. Or even a rakish fogey at the wheel of a parked Austin-Healey roadster, offering the girls a ride.

This Rees-Mogg, Roman Catholic, a Somerset man, child of learning, is proud of his background. He lacks his father's lip but the accent is every bit as pukka and Edwardian as the old man's. It has not been blunted to make it more hip-hop demotic, more congenial to that gruesome place we call 'modern Britain'. Jacob sounds exactly what he is: bookish but not particularly landed gentry. It is not his fault if, in this day and age, the younger princes of the House of Windsor manage to sound more 'street' than he does, with their glottal-stoppin', nite-clubbin' ways. Has Jacob ever entered a dis-co-theque? One rather doubts it. He would prefer to

CHARCOAL SUITS, A HINT OF FOB WATCH: HE COULD SPRING FROM THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

spend an evening with his snout in a history book, or, perhaps, in devout study of a missal. Rees-Mogg, MP, is a willow in the middle of a flooding stream. The waters eddy around him, yet his roots are secure. Charcoal suits with drainpipe trousers, a hint of fob watch, creaking brogues, a brain stuffed with classical quotations: he could spring from the land that time forgot.

How Labour used to cream themselves at the prospect of our Jacob in the Commons. Here was the Etonian throwback (they thought), here was the caricature of a Posh Percy who took his old nanny on the campaign trail. (It's true, by the way. He did drag Nanny around the doorsteps of one of the seats he contested in earlier years. Jolly effective she proved too, making sure that the

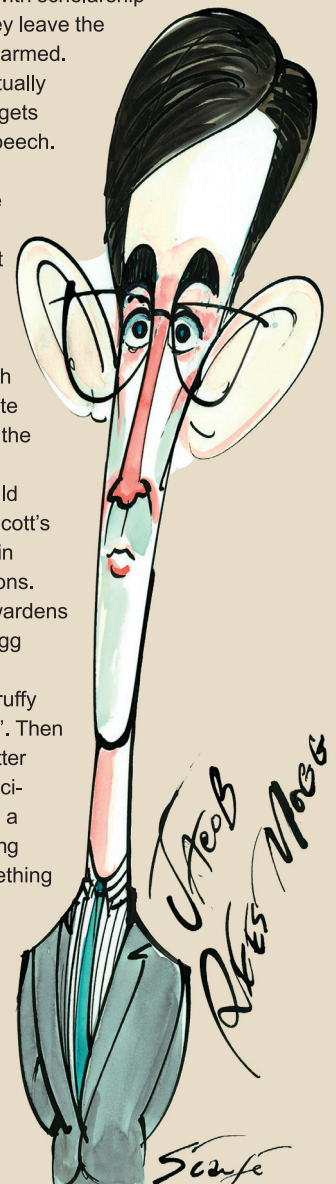
candidate was tucked up in bed well before midnight with his mug of cocoa during the campaign.

Lefties thought Jacob a joke. Thought he would be a gift to them. They were wrong. Why? Because he is so unfazed by the class-war attacks, because he is so fluent and drily humorous a public speaker, because he is as original as a Werther's butterscotch sucky sweet.

Rees-Mogg, who is married to the beautiful Helena de Chair and producing heirs at the rate of a Rolls-Royce production line, has wowed the Commons since his arrival in 2010. He is impeccably polite to all-comers, declaring himself 'delighted' when opponents try to intervene in his speeches. He responds directly to their flak, invariably with scholarship and wit, and they leave the battleground charmed. Labour MPs actually cheer when he gets up to make a speech.

Nor is he a Tory stooge. He has frequently rebelled against the party line, standing up for old-fashioned Tory beliefs such as the small state and freedom of the individual. His vocabulary would have John Prescott's eyes swivelling in opposite directions. London traffic wardens were, Rees-Mogg told the House, 'desperately scruffy tatterdemalions'. Then he used a 29-letter word, 'floccinaucinihilipilification', a jolly way of saying 'estimating something as worthless'.

He was talking about judges in the European Court of Justice at the time. Attaboy!



Illustrated by GERALD SCARFE