

THE UPS OF ONE-DOWNMANSHP; It takes courage to admit that your career isn't highflying and your love life is lukewarm, but it can also be liberating, says Yasmine Lever. What's more, a game of one-downmanship can get surprisingly upbeat results.

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Byline: YASMINE LEVER

Recently I attended the 40th birthday party of my successful banker sister, who is happily married with two gorgeous kids. While I adore my sister, I do find her parties somewhat frightening, as my own life has not followed a similarly successful track. A friend of hers - let's call her Camilla - approached me so that we could play a game of catch-up. Normally I would make a feeble attempt to put a positive spin on my life, even enthuse about some exciting project that was currently in the works - with both of us getting increasingly embarrassed at my attempts to bluff.

This time I decided to try a different tack:

'Are you still acting?' Camilla asked.

'No,' I replied.

'What made you decide to give it up?' '

I was sick to death of not getting any work.' At this point, my sister, who was standing nearby, turned around and, like the loyal sister she is, announced that I was now writing, had won several short story competitions and had written a novel.

'Oh, but that's fabulous!' Camilla enthused. 'What happened to the novel?' 'It got rejected all over town and now is sitting mute as a saved file on my laptop.' '

"My first two novels got rejected. Don't let it get you down.'

Camilla used to work in publishing but now she has a three-book deal with HarperCollins. 'How many agents did it go to?'

'Two.'

'Two! Even my third book got rejected by five agents before it got accepted.' She then suggested that I send her a copy so she could take a look and maybe pass it on. I thanked her profusely.

'Two agents,' Camilla chuckled as she shook her head. 'My first novel went through 20.'

My acting agent, whose services I enlisted when I moved to New York at

18, would have been horrified by this conversation. She would have accused Camilla and me of engaging in a battle of one-downmanship, and she would never have believed that such heinous behaviour on my part could have produced such a positive result. In the past, she had become so frustrated by my inability to win parts at auditions (even though directors claimed that I could act), that she insisted that I go to see her once a week for mock interviews, in an effort to teach me how to sell myself. The interviews went something like this: Agent: 'I hear you spent a summer performing with Tracey Ullman and Morgan Freeman in *The Taming of the Shrew*.' Me: 'Sadly, no. My part got cut because they needed to knock off 20 minutes from the show.' At this, my agent would glare at me as if I had just informed her that she had a spot on her chin.

'You don't say that!' she'd cry. 'You talk about how excited you were when you heard you had been cast fresh out of drama school, and you enthuse about how inspiring it was rehearsing with such great talents as Morgan and Tracey. The fact that you didn't appear in the play is entirely incidental.' So I learned over the course of these excruciating interviews that prancing around in a green tunic as a wood nymph while Keanu Reeves slouched around as Trinculo meant that I had played 'opposite' him in *The Tempest*. The 'off' was dropped from the myriad off-Broadway plays that I performed in. A gig as an extra on *Friends* was soon referred to as a 'guest spot'. But, sadly, no amount of mock interviews with my agent could get me to wax poetic about my imaginary successes with any kind of conviction. Instead, I felt like I was doing a very poor imitation of my father, a former politician, who never had a hard time blowing his own trumpet. And so the years were spent acting in plays so dire I offered to pay friends not to attend. Waitressing and babysitting soon became my major sources of income. Then I moved to Los Angeles, where, at parties, everyone rattles off their CV if you make the mistake of asking how they are. Added to this, hypnotherapy failed to help me conquer my fear of driving, and at auditions in LA, if someone saw you stepping off the bus, you got treated like a leper.

Finally I could stand it no longer. I gave up acting, took up novel writing (the only job no one claims to do at LA parties), and having come home to London to attend my sister's 40th, I decided to stay put.

Back at the party Camilla and I had now moved into a discussion about men, and when I said I had been single for a while, Camilla expressed

disbelief.

So I explained my penchant for unavailable men: a gay kick-boxing teacher, a white rapper with a sex addiction, a documentary filmmaker who failed to mention that he had another girlfriend. Then we discussed my childless state and how, living in New York and LA, it was easy not to realise just how fast my biological clock was ticking. And here's the thing: the brasher I became about admitting all my muck-ups, the more relaxed Camilla seemed to become.

By the time I had got round to telling her I was currently borrowing money from my brother at interest, she looked positively buoyant.

'You know, I often think I should have just stayed here and gone to university like everybody else,' I said over Camilla's howl. She then told me how unhappy she had been at university. How her boyfriend at the time was schizophrenic, her father left her mother, and her teenage flatmate gave birth to a mentally challenged child.

'Wow!' I said, when she had finished recounting one woeful university saga after another. 'I thought college years were supposed to be the good ones.' 'Not for me,' she said. 'To be honest my biggest regret is never having had the courage in my 20s to go and live abroad.' If Camilla and I were engaging in one-downmanship that night, then I think one-downmanship is the way to go.

I found talking to Camilla (after all that time spent listening to scores of self-publicists) as soothing as an aromatherapy massage.

And here is another thing: I feel far more inclined to accept someone's offer of help if I'm not feeling guilty for misleading them with some false dazzling self-image.

Playing things down also serves to lessen my nerves when it comes to men.

Recently I attended a gala at the Gate theatre in London's Notting Hill, which was filled with a slew of accomplished men. One attractive individual approached me for a chat. Finally, he asked the dreaded question which makes me contemplate moving to somewhere like Sri Lanka: 'So what do you do?' I paused before replying, 'Right now I do absolutely nothing.' For a moment he looked startled but then he broke into a smile. 'Good for you,' he said as he raised his glass. 'Enjoy it while it lasts. I have only just ended a rather long period of similar inactivity.' Then he went on to explain that the next day he was flying off to Los Angeles to work for three weeks on a

film, and after discussing the film, we set up a date for two days after his return.

That night I had so much fun with him and a few other low-key types that when the gala ended, the management had to plead with us to leave.

So, for better or worse, I have decided to give up trying to pretend I'm someone that I am not. I have decided that it's finally time to play myself. At least that way I might give somebody a laugh.