

An unpleasant surprise

DUGLAS WAS DEVASTATED when Vanessa left him. In a way difficult to recover from.

He didn't realize she married him for his money—or what she thought was his money, which was actually his family's money. Oh, there might have been something more as well, since Douglas really is very attractive in his own way. He has a nice face, often curled into a pleasant smile, if not always an entirely natural one. He is kind and thoughtful. He is not in love with money, which makes him lovable in many ways (although not to Vanessa). His greatest vice may be his walking, which he does like Thoreau, compulsively, taking from the woods the consolation that perhaps he does not find in human society.

In any case Douglas was completely blindsided by Vanessa's mercenary motives. He did not have any such motives himself, which made it difficult for him to see them in others or to believe they really did exist outside of movies and novels. In fact to this day if you happened to walk up to him on the street and said something like "she married you for your money, you know," he would look at you with a puzzled expression and cock his head as if he were trying to figure out if you were being serious.

Douglas was a victim of his own good fortune. His father gave him a snappy BMW convertible his senior year in college as a combination Christmas-graduation present, thus achieving the twin goals of amazing his unflappable son and annoying his overbearing wife. Vanessa saw him in it at school and was intrigued. One of her girlfriends was in an accounting class with him and agreed to introduce them. She said he was stand-offish, but on their first date Vanessa realized he was just shy. She was prepared to bag a lion and was almost disappointed when he turned out to be a lamb.

Douglas was the proverbial putty in her perfectly prettified hands. To say he was not experienced with women would be the understatement of the century. Because of his shyness, and his strong moral feelings, he had managed to get through high school and most of college without ever having had an actual date. He was not exactly made for the dating game. Even if there was someone he was inclined to admire—someone who seemed interesting and sincere—he could not bring himself to approach her. It wasn't just because he was afraid of rejection. He also had very high ideas about love and an abhorrence of the types of strategies that modern courtship typically entails.

Consider Douglas's paradox. How can you approach a girl with the possibility of love and relationship on your mind if you do not know her well enough to know if you are compatible—and on the other hand how can you find out if you are compatible if you don't approach her? How can you invite entanglement and not entangle, intentionally or otherwise? How can you kindle interest without risking a fire? Douglas took love seriously. Did he have the same desires as others of his sex? We dare say he did—but his idealism (combined, as we said, with shyness) outweighed any selfishness.

Which made him the perfect mark for Vanessa. She was the first girl who actively pursued him. There were other girls in the past who *wanted* to pursue him, but they mistook his delicacy and reticence for pride. Nothing could be further from the truth. Douglas did not have a haughty bone in his body. It took someone with Vanessa's peculiar skills to unpack this. She saw he was shy. She saw he was chivalrous. It wasn't hard to make herself into someone he could dote on.

In short, Vanessa was a very attractive, popular girl who took a determined interest in Douglas and made him feel like the most important guy in the world. It was flattering and most of all it was surprising. Vanessa was full of smiles and softness and sugar. How could he *not* fall in love?

Especially when he so much wanted to be in love and had so little experience. He fell hard. He lost all interest in anything else. Good thing it was his last semester at school.

He took her to the family estate in Greenwich. Vanessa was used to a comfortable home, but this was something else again. The large brick mansion on thirty manicured acres with tennis courts, pool, gardens, guest house, barns, etc., were wonderful. Douglas had his quirks, but she could definitely see herself marrying him. Okay, so he was a little awkward. He treated her like she was a virgin, which was amusing. But it was not a deal-breaker. She could help him with that.

The window of opportunity was closing. Graduation was coming up fast and they would be returning to their home towns. She did not know if absence made the heart grow fonder, but it did expose it to dangers and distractions. Vanessa wanted to make sure she did not lose Douglas. It was surprisingly easy to steer him in the direction of marriage, a guy who was looking for his one true love and believed he had found her. They were married in July in considerable style.

Unfortunately this was the high point of the relationship for Vanessa. Even on the honeymoon she began to notice things that troubled her. She did not know this man she found herself with on the fabulous beaches of St. Lucia. He turned into a slobbering puppy. He seemed to cling to her. She did not like that, especially in public. She tried to get him to stop, but he thought it was funny.

They bought a house in town, helped by a generous down-payment from his father, and Vanessa began to see more of the family. This too was troubling. She realized that Douglas was not the favorite son, at least not with his mother, even though he was the oldest, which raised certain unfortunate thoughts in her mind. Helen Lendell made no bones about her preference for the adorable Roger, and Helen ruled the roost.

Then there was the job. She understood why Douglas wanted to find employment as soon as possible after graduation—but what a job! He went to see a friend of his mother who had a sleepy little accounting firm in town to get some career advice and the guy had the temerity to hire him on the spot. His first paycheck came as quite a shock. She kept staring at it where he left it naked on the kitchen table as if it were nothing to be ashamed of.

Vanessa landed a better job herself a month later with almost no effort at all. She was just getting started in the corporate world and needed to buy her outfits where she needed to buy them, if you know what we mean. She loved nice things and going out and traveling. Her starting salary was much gaudier than his. Was he expecting *her* to carry the weight? It was not what she had in mind.

By then the puppydog act was starting to wear thin. She got it; he loved her. But all he ever wanted to do was “spend time” with her. He seemed to have no interest in going out. Domesticity is fine, in small doses, but she had no intention of giving up the night life that she loved so much. And his money worries didn’t hold water. Go out and get a better job!

Vanessa began to suspect she had sold herself short. She had beauty and brains and ambition and deserved a guy who was on his way up, not someone who was content to lie down. It was also just about this time that she was thrown into the orbit of a dashing office prodigy who was bucking for an associate director spot at the tender age of twenty-eight. Her cube was right down the hall from his office. He often stopped by to chat. She caught him staring at her on more than one occasion, or her ankle.

It was not her fault if she found herself thrown together with him for ten hours a day. It was not her fault if he invited her to his meetings even when they didn’t seem to have anything to do with her. It was not her fault if she wound up on a business trip with him to San Francisco, or that they had adjoining seats on the plane, or that his leg happened to

brush up against hers as they went through their in-flight rituals. In short, it was not her fault if she didn't find true love until she had already been married.

Unfortunately Douglas had no idea of any of this. He thought things were getting better. Vanessa finally stopped scolding him about his job. She even let him play his trombone, sometimes. How was he supposed to know this newfound tolerance was a sign of already having checked out of the marriage?

Hence he had no idea how to react when he came home early from work one foggy evening in November and found the front door wide open. He meandered up to the porch and stood there as she bombed out of the house with her arms full of clothes. He watched her cram her burden into the car and croaked out a "hi" as she breezed by him again, but she just waved, looking annoyed.

Was she mad at him about something? If so, he could not imagine what. He felt guilty but didn't know why. He was afraid to ask for an explanation because he was afraid of the answer she might give. So he stood off to the side, in the shadow of the soft November night, as if a stranger in his own yard—which in a sense he was, since they had only been in the house a few months.

Down she came again in the same flouncing Joan Crawford manner with her arms full of stuff. She stopped and looked at him.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"You're so perceptive. Yes, as a matter of fact. I am 'going somewhere.' I'm moving out."

"Why?"

"Because this was a mistake, and it's better for everyone if we just rectify it right now before it gets any worse."

"I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"No, of course not. Call me when you get a clue. On second thought—don't."

“Can we talk about this?”

“No, we can’t. It will just make things worse. There’s no point in dragging it out. Believe me, it’s better to make a clean break and get on with our lives.”

Vanessa sped off, tires peeling, and he went into the house and sat down in a daze on the sofa she insisted on buying with the money they didn’t have. What was he going to do now? For a long time he just sat there with a blur of garish images storming through his brain. He saw her flying by with arms full of items that may or may not have been hers. He saw the sneer on her face as she unloaded her final snark.

It was like a dream, like someone else’s story. He fantasized about her coming back. She was not coming back. Events had been set in motion and could not be diverted from their course. His wife of four months had deserted him and he was naked in his soul and all alone in their new house. He wanted to call somebody to protest—but whom? He could not call his parents; there would be no sympathy there, unless his father answered the phone, which he never did, since the calls were always for his mother.

An hour passed, two hours, with him still sitting there in the same spot, glued there, unable to move. The door was still wide open. The neighbors’ miniature poodle bounced in and bounced around the living room and onto his lap. He just sat there and stared at him. The little ball of energy bounced out the door and still he just sat there. He did not get up to close the door. It was balmy for November, but the furnace was running. He didn’t care. He did not want the door to be closed.