

RULES FOR ROMANCE - FOR THOSE WHO'D BE HAPPY

By request, here, in its entirety, is the series of essays I wrote for the now defunct blog of a friend of mine who asked "Why is dating such a drag these days? Why don't relationships work anymore?" It's lengthy, and a bit - well - elaborate in style, but if you are interested in the subject, I hope you find it useful.

Rules for Romance, For Those Who'd Be Happy.

A series of essays on how abiding love may be found and nurtured in an age which has forgotten its joy and art.

By Peregrinus

Dedicated to my Lady, who could advise you far better on how to make an imperfect lover into her devoted and grateful partner.

"How to handle a woman? There's a way," said the wise old man, "A way known by ev'ry woman Since the whole rigmarole began."

"Do I flatter her?" I begged him answer. "Do I threaten or cajole or plead? Do I brood or play the gay romancer?"

Said he, smiling: "No indeed."

How to handle a woman? Mark me well, I will tell you, sir: The way to handle a woman Is to love her...simply love her...

Merely love her...love her...love her."1

- Camelot, Alan Jay Lerner

Rules for Romance, For Those Who'd Be Happy. Part the First

I have been in a happy marriage for over twenty years. It has been genuinely happy - I can honestly say that no problem has arisen that we have not been able to overcome with dispatch, and learned something thereby - becoming more committed to each other in the process. So I claim some small, modest expertise in the art of domestic happiness, and, by request, I'd like to share a bit of that in a useful form.

This is what works for me. It is an unapologetically old-fashioned perspective, tried and true. But as the saying goes, your mileage may vary. Do I have to say this isn't a "pick up guide?" That this is not "the game?" If all you're interested in is getting laid by someone you're sexually attracted to, this isn't the series of essays for you. This is about finding a worthwhile mate to go on the greatest adventure of life together, and having great heaps of fun in the search. Again, unapologetically old-fashioned. So be it.

First, and of primary importance, marry the right person. This is easier than you might think, but perhaps a bit counter-intuitive. You have been taught that marriage is a matter of emotion - that you must be hopelessly, heedlessly "in love" to choose your partner.

Balderdash. Codswallop. Dangerous, foolish twaddle.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big believer in romance. I have, and still do, chase it down moonbeams, serenade my lover, write her poems 2, the whole messy, schmaltzy fun ride. I am an unabashed romancer.

But having those feelings is just about the worst reason I can think of to get married.

Feelings are great. They are fine things. But ask yourself this - would you still feel them if you had the stomach flu? Or if your partner had it? Or if, heaven forefend, you *both* had it?

Of course not. Nobody who is spewing at both ends is feeling like composing a sonnet.3 But if you marry, the day will come, *many* days, perhaps *most* days, when either you, or they, will not be able to get your gallant on. Marriage is sustained by romance, but it is not built upon such an ephemeral, fragile thing that can be put utterly to flight by a tiny virus. Marriage, when mature, *true* love can survive the flu, or disability, or cancer. I know. I've been there.

So how do you find such a person? The answer is, you don't. You *build* such a lover - in yourself, and in your partner over a period of years. It is a mutual project - you build each

other, overcoming the slings, arrows, flood-tides of bullshit and flaming meteors of life-suck that crash down on you both. You face them together, and with each disaster you practice mutually supporting each other regardless of whether you're feeling it in the moment. Above all, ***Love is a verb***. Love is what you do you are afraid, tired, sick, or sick and tired, and you recommit to one another, determined to be supportive, to be the lover you want to be - gallant, resilient, and loving in the face of life's stress monster, and in the moments when you, and/or your lover are not lovable. Imperfections and setbacks faced are the mortar that builds your brave castle of love that is proof against both barbarians and storm. Cherish the rough times.

But, obviously, first, you must find the raw material. How do you find a person with such potential? They are rare. Accept this. Know that you will cast many roses at unworthy feet. So what? Have fun. Romance many. Some will take the rose in their teeth and invite you to tango. Some will stomp on your roses. What of that? Be brave. Have fun. Take each thing in its time. Rush nothing.

Most of you have no clue whatsoever on how to date. I have seen you stumble in this. For generations now, this has been a nearly lost art - lost to the point that people actually go through the gruesome pantomime of pretending that their encounters are mere chance. Pfft. Cowards. Fear nothing. I, a knight of some experience in the romantic lists, who is currently enjoying an epic "happily ever after" am here to teach you how to get your gallant on. Here is what you are seeking, as you date - and do, by the way, *date* - that is to say, go out with people in a premeditated manner to romance them. Set the stage. Long walks by the river. Pizza at midnight in a lovely spot overlooking the city, or if it's more your style, opera and wine. Whatever. It doesn't have to be expensive, it does have to be *premeditatively* romantic.

Why? Why take the risk of rejection? Why face the pressure of designing a moment to remember? First, because it's fun. Believe me. And it's more honest than pretending that maybe you aren't interested in romance - that you're too cool for school. Oh, bullshit. If he or she can't handle a date, they can't handle love. Find someone who'll appreciate your gallant silliness. And enjoy the search. Only the brave deserve the fair, regardless of gender.

And I really shouldn't have to say this, but I am assured that I do have to make it clear. This advice goes equally for all (not both, *all*) genders. One of the great things about living in the 21st Century is that the role of romancing gallant is open to each and every gender. If it looks like fun, *ask*.

Here's how you ask. "I like your style. I'd like to take you out for a romantic lunch. We'll have fun. How about Saturday at [Insert fun place here]?" Lunch, by the way, is the Muse's gift to first dates. Consider it strongly, since it is pressure free - everybody arrives by their own transport, and goes home under their own steam, and it doesn't have to last long - it has a logical end. Again I say, consider lunch.

If you ask someone out on a date, and they equivocate, or refuse, it says nothing of your worthiness. Move on with a smile. Obsession is both counterproductive and unbecoming.⁴ Remember, you are looking for someone to have fun with, and perhaps to go on a great adventure with, not someone to hector. Ask once, and only once. If the person you're considering is too busy, suggest an alternate time or date. But only once. A primary rule of the game at this stage is, you must give the other person plenty of room to refuse. So, now someone has agreed to a first date with you. This will be fun. Above all things, it should be fun. Relax, be at your best. Dress well, but not extravagantly. Be on time (do I really have to tell you that?) Keep the conversation light. Get your charm on.

And know that the vast majority of the time, you will get a pleasant first date out of this, and nothing more. That's fine! You both had fun, but nothing clicked. A pleasant moment in a life hopefully filled with them. You are under no obligation to ask for another, and neither are they. If you feel so moved, ask again. If not, no harm done. If you ask again, and are refused, well, *c'est la guerre*, my gallant. No one can say why sometimes the spark is there, and sometimes it is not. Ah well. The idea that there is only one person out there that will do - that there is a predestined "soulmate" out there that if you miss them your chance for romance is forever blighted is pernicious hogwash. There are many out there who are worthy of love. They are not common, you will break many a glass slipper, kiss many a toad, but they are out there. Keep trying, and have fun doing so.

And here is how you do it. In the course of conversation, Pay an honest, simple compliment. Notice something unique and interesting about this person. Preferably the way they do something, rather than some physical attribute. See how they react. How someone accepts an honest compliment says much about them. Do you find how they do so charming, or interesting? Good. If not, well, you're out the cost of lunch. So what? A small price to pay.

Note how they treat people they don't have to be nice to. How do they treat parking attendants, waitstaff, etc. How do they handle small disappointments? These things matter because, in the long run, you will, at some point, get on their nerves. How this person handles such things tells you much. Because above all things, far beyond whether you find them beautiful or attractive, you want someone who is patient and kind. Nothing, in the long run, is more important.

That's quite enough for a first date. Next essay, what comes next. This is going to be fun.

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy. Part the Second - Progressive Commitment

Before we begin a discussion of how to conduct dates, I'd like to introduce an important concept - that of progressive commitment.

Progressive commitment is a way of thinking of the increasing emotional investment you put into a developing romantic relationship. It is also a way of thinking about obligations incurred and rightly expected in return. As a romantic relationship develops it goes through identifiable stages:

Acquaintance

First date

Subsequent dates

Exclusive dating

Engagement

Marriage

It is of the utmost importance to your present and future happiness that you recognize where you are in this progression. Remember, we are looking for a life-partner, but we're doing it honestly, gallantly, and with a sense of fun. If you lose track of what is reasonably expected of you, or what you can reasonably expect, you will be tempted to lie, and perhaps to take advantage of an imbalance of commitment. And I promise you, misunderstandings in this context are anything but fun.

Keep in mind, too that this is not a project. If a relationship peaks at any given point, *it wasn't necessarily a failure*. Not every "successful" relationship ends in a lifetime commitment. If you are considerate, honest, and give some thought to making each date fun and romantic, and if you are kind to everyone you are involved with, you will have happy memories of your time together. It is possible for old lovers to be very good friends, or at least smiling acquaintances. It not necessary for every relationship that ends to have an Armageddon. We'll discuss endings later, but for now, be comforted with the fact that endings don't have to be disastrous.

The next few essays will describe this progression. Yes, we're going to talk about sex. Later. *Much* later. In detail. Down to the nitty-gritty of sexual etiquette. And if you are taking the hint that I'm advocating a slow-go approach to physical intimacy, you're doing well. If you are bored by all this "relationship and dating stuff," might I suggest that Penthouse Forum might be better reading for your idle hours, you Philistine?

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy - Part the Third – Acquaintance

Now, on to our progression. First, there is acquaintance. Now I am going to convince a great number of you that I am a hopeless reactionary - a fuddy-duddy-Elmer-Fuddy. Do kids still say that? If they don't, they should. Okay, they never said that. But they should. Anyway, I'd ask you to consider adopting an old guideline that will go a long way toward avoiding misunderstandings and even potential dangers. You should not agree to, or ask for a date with someone to whom you have not been properly introduced.⁵

I think half of you just got the vapors. I hear the clatter of jawbones hitting the floor. "Is this guy kidding? His high-button shoes are on too tight! The mustache wax has gone to his

brain!" Hear me out. How many really, really bad stories start with, "so I met this person at a party?" How many times have you seen some poor gallant attempt to introduce themselves and find that they have offended, or suffered a humiliating rejection? Want to avoid all that? Want to avoid "pick-up lines," "the Game," potential accusations of harassment and buying drinks for people of dubious quality? Ask for, and receive dates from people with whom you have a mutual friend.

By sticking to this rule, you will first avoid cretins and creeps. If your friend knows a lot of cretins and creeps, perhaps you need other friends. You may need to educate your friends a bit, gently letting them know that you're trying to expand your social circle, and you'd appreciate being introduced to their friends. You will reciprocate, of course. Don't worry that your friend is married, and that most of their friends are married. They know people, and those people know people, and who doesn't need a wide circle of acquaintances?

"But I'm an Introvert!" You might say. The thought of mixing and mingling with people makes you, if not actually fearful, at least fearfully tired. Tedious small talk, unfair judgments, gossip and vacuous discussions of pop-culture nonsense. Ugh. You're right, of course. I'm no introvert, (ENFP, if you care to know,) but I find many social engagements barren. I always drive myself to them, so that I don't have to wait for a ride to leave. But if you see them as a chance to introduce people, and to be introduced to them, and feel free to leave when you find them tiresome with a polite, "I really must go," then they won't be so tedious. What's tedious is being marooned on Blather Island. Think of your polite exit strategy before you arrive.

If you want to avoid gatherings with a bunch of people with whom you have nothing in common, there is a simple solution - affinity groups. These are simply groups of people who meet to enjoy, or further a common interest. They range from churches, to softball leagues to book clubs to sewing circles. I met my wife in a community theatre production of "Cyrano de Bergerac." Obviously, if you are interested in romance, you might want to pick a group that includes members of the gender that interests you. If you are a straight male, a rugby team probably won't involve many women who aren't already committed to someone involved. Still, if you like rugby (I do!) then it's still worth your time. Again, you want a

wide circle of acquaintances. Your tight-head prop has a sister, you know. Perhaps he'll introduce you...

This strategy also has the excellent advantage of giving you many opportunities to make new friends, and to enjoy the things that interest you with like-minded people who appreciate them. In these times, where affinity groups are harder to come by than they used to be, you may have to work at it a bit. But it's worth it. You may even want to start one. So, you've been introduced, you've spoken with someone who piques your interest. Great. So ask. It's probably best not to do so the first time you meet someone. It looks a bit desperate, but play it by ear. You can always ask, "will you be at the next function?" Don't worry about getting contact information at the first meeting, trust to fate. If you've had two conversations you enjoyed, then you can ask for contact information. Email is great. Phone numbers are okay, but come with an element of risk. Addresses, at this stage, are quite risky, as first impressions can be deceiving, and being stalked is no fun, regardless of your gender. Giving an address is seen by some people as an invitation to an unannounced visit. Need I mention that having an email address that's easy to remember is helpful?

Having a social calling card is useful. Once upon a more elegant age, these cards were common. Now, having a card handy that has your name and email on it will be seen as quaint. Don't use your business card - that looks like a gauche attempt to impress someone with your job title. I used to have inexpensive pens with my name and email on them. You'll be surprised how well this will be received. People keep pens, (most people who aren't hard chargers don't keep business cards) they're useful, and you can always claim that you have them for some other purpose.⁶

All that said, I'm a strong advocate of asking for a date in person, and in using the word "romantic" in the invitation. Why? Well, getting an email from an acquaintance that suggests romance looks a little spooky, somehow. You can always send a email asking if someone will be at an event, then ask them for the date at the event.

Alternatively, send them an email suggesting that you can meet them for coffee in a friendly, low-pressure manner. "I'm usually at the "Common Grounds Coffee House" Thursday afternoon, about three. If you happen to be in the neighborhood, I'd enjoy your

company." Remember, this isn't a "date," you were going to be there anyway. If they don't show, and they don't suggest another meeting, that tells you what you need to know. If they don't show, remember, you haven't been "stood up," this wasn't a date, it was little more than a chance meeting.

The reason I advocate using the word "romantic" when asking for a date is that it avoids ambiguity. And it is just goofy enough to give them the chance to decline with a gentle laugh. No harm done. It also allows you to gauge how the person feels about romance in general. Useful information, to be sure.

Whew. That's enough on acquaintance. Next, we're going to discuss first dates. It's a pleasant topic. I plan to be on this blog next week, dear reader. Hope to see you there.

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy - Part the Fourth - First Dates

You'll probably have more first dates than any other kind until you find your lifelong partner. So, if you want your romantic quest to be pleasant, on the whole, mastering the art of the first date is of high importance. And if you don't become at least competent at it, there won't be many second dates, now will there?

First dates are anxiety-inducing, but they're also great fun. You don't know quite what to expect, but if you give some thought to the process, and give heed to a few simple guidelines, you can reasonably expect at least a pleasant conversation. Heed me, O gallant! And be brave.

I've already gone over why you should always consider lunch for a first date. If you haven't read that essay yet, and I strongly advise that you do, (Part the First, *Ibid*) then suffice to say that lunch is low pressure, escapable without undue awkwardness, and generally low in expense. I've also gone over why, when you ask, you should use the word "romantic" in your invitation.⁷ There are some that say that ambiguity is romantic. I disagree. Ambiguity is confusing, leads to misunderstandings, and deprives you of the benefit of observing your intended date's reaction, from which you can often gather all you need to know. How someone handles the compliment of being asked on a real, honest-to-goodness date tells you much.

So, someone has agreed to meet you for lunch, and expects to be romanced. You will be on time, well, but not extravagantly dressed, charming, witty, and primed with sparkling conversation. You will choose an ideal venue, which you know your partner likes, since they agreed to the venue. You did remember to mention the venue when you asked, didn't you? All is well.

"But how?" I hear you say, a hint of trepidation causing your normally melodious voice to quiver. Perhaps you will say, "I am an introverted member of Generation Hook-Up, the Nintendo tribe! No one has ever taught me this elaborate, yet enchanting art!" Or perhaps you will say, "I am a very serious person with a very serious job and a very serious lack of gorm in the art of Romance!"

Fear not, O gallant. Wise Old Peregrinus is here. "The very minute bids thee ope thine ear." Or eyeballs, in this case.

First, to dress. The answer is far simpler than you might imagine. You have chosen a place you have been before, in which you are comfortable. You have done this because you are, first, not stupid, and second, because you will take my advice. Now, you know how people generally dress at this venue. Dress like that. Simple. Pay a bit of extra attention to your presentation, but in general, that's all that's necessary.

No, wait, first is a rule that I *must* insist upon. Your phone stays in your pocket. Taking a call or texting when on a date is unforgivable. If you are not an Emergency Room Physician or a Bomb Disposal Expert It. Can. Wait. If you break this rule, I hope you end up marrying the sort of person who will take a phone call in the middle of a romantic date. That is to say, a churlish boor. Have I made myself *abundantly* clear?

Huff, puff. Calm down Peregrinus!...The reason I get so...*insistent* on this point is that the purpose of a date is to show focused, positive attention to another human being who is right in front of you. If you can't manage that for an hour, then you are simply not temperamentally fit for this art.

Perhaps you have done this. Repent, sinner. And resolve to amend your ways.

Ahem...

Second, to be charming and witty.⁸ Again, this is not so difficult as you imagine. Be yourself, but go lightly on certain topics. The following topics do not lend themselves to romance:

Politics

Religion

Former relationships

Any attempt to save the world

The faults of others

Tragedy of any sort

Work

"So now what? All my best conversation is gone!" I hope not, but that's probably untrue.

Here are some excellent, time tested topics for first dates:

Hobbies

Literature

Music

Art

Anything either of you do for fun

Food

Travel

Movies

Your favorite place to go that isn't a restaurant or a bar

Avoid lengthy anecdotes. This is a date, not an interview, and your partner is not your biographer. The key is to ask intelligent questions, and to listen well. People blossom under the light of genuine, focused attention. Make eye contact. Smile when something amuses you.

Most people will, when given the chance, talk about themselves. And generally, they're good at it. After all, they know the topic. Feel free to prompt them with an open question or two, such as "What was your favorite part of that?"

Now, at some time in the evening, pay an honest compliment. Preferably about something they did or said that you found charming and unique. Watch their reaction. This tells you much about this person's self-image, their grace, and their ability to handle unusual situations. After all, it is a sad fact that such honest compliments are rare these days. Don't let lunch go on to dinner. About an hour is right, but play it by ear. Whenever the meal is done, feel free to say, "I've enjoyed our lunch, but I have to be moving along." You should, at this point, ask for contact information if you don't already have it. If your request is denied, smile, and take comfort in the fact that you know all you need to know. Pick up the tab. This is a date. Your partner may attempt to resist this, and if they actually make a fuss, allow it, but I suggest you first say something along the lines of "Consider it a small token of my gratitude. I really enjoyed your company." Even if you didn't. Gallantry is sometimes a shade less than perfectly honest. Unless your date sets the centerpiece on fire, mentions their collection of hollowed-out cat heads, insists on displaying all the weapons they brought with them,⁹ or goes on about their multiple restraining orders,¹⁰ there is seldom a reason to rout from a first date. But if you feel you must, there is only one graceful way to do so. Say, "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid the time has gotten away from me. I really must go. Immediately." Wait for no answer, make no explanations, get up and go. Pay the check on your way out. Absent imminent danger or outrage, bear up to the end of lunch. At least you'll have a story to tell later. You *will* have the grace to change the name, won't you?¹¹ What you *don't* need to do is immediately book the next date. Walk your partner to their transport. Say something along the lines of "Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did." Make no promises, no matter how charmed you were. You have some things to think about. What to think about, how to get the next date, and how to comport yourself on that date is the topic of our next essay. Until then, my gallants, grace be upon you! Thank you for spending this time with me. I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did. See how good that feels?

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy - Part the Fifth - Subsequent Dates

Welcome, my gallants! Strength to your hearts!

So, you've enjoyed a pleasant first date with a partner who interests you. Your confidence in the art is growing, and you begin to feel the art of romance is within your grasp. Good! But be aware, this "middle ground," the time between the excitement of the first date, and the beginnings of commitment has its joys, but it also has its perils. You have much to consider after that first date.

Sit down with a glass of your favorite beverage, light a cigar, if you're so inclined, and ponder the first date. Did you enjoy the date? Did your partner? If the answer to either of these questions is "no," or "somewhat," then your task is done. You needn't go further. If you don't at least detect a spark of pleasure in each other's company, if there isn't even a whiff of chemistry, then you may begin thinking about who you might ask to lunch next. No harm done.

It may well be that the company was pleasant enough, but there was no, well, spark of romantic interest on one, or both of your parts. That's fine, you just made a new acquaintance, who may someday become a friend. Who knows what the future holds? But do *not, under any circumstances* allow your partner to think that a romance is blossoming. If they are not interested, then you will become an annoyance. If it is you that is not interested, you will be behaving cruelly.

Avoiding the misapprehension is simple. Do not initiate further contact. Be gently, strategically unavailable. If you encounter this person again, be friendly and polite, but give no cues that you are romantically interested at all. Keep any conversation friendly, casual, and short. Under no circumstances allow yourself to be alone with this person until the nature of your acquaintance is clear.

Only once have I had someone ask why I didn't ask her out again. I said, "You were very pleasant. I am grateful for your company. The fact that no spark was struck is my loss, I'm sure." Do not discuss this further. Do I need to say that you should *never* ask why someone isn't romantically interested in you? First, they probably don't know. I couldn't put my finger on the "why" usually, the magic just didn't happen. That's no one's fault. Second, they

may *tell* you! And above all, *never, ever* engage in a critique; a gruesome post-mortem of a date gone awry! There is no useful way to do this without giving mortal offense.

Now think, my friend, about the date. Was your partner gracious? Interesting? What did you find out about them? It is not unwise, or ungallant to jot down a few notes, if you feel so inclined. What was their favorite topic of conversation? What did they eat? What hobbies or interests did they mention? Do they like music? What sort? Did they say anything that stuck with you as clever or notable? If you can't answer at least some of these questions, then you haven't been doing your due diligence on the date! Remember, a date is, among other things, about giving someone you like your concentrated attention.

Now let us say that you found this person romantically interesting, and you suspect that the feeling was reciprocated. I'm going to suggest a protocol that will strike you as odd. First, wait a day or two. No one likes to feel badgered. Then, write a handwritten note on nice stationery, and put it in the mail. It should say something like, "I enjoyed our lunch. You were charming company. Let's get together again soon." Nothing more, no suggestion of venue or time.

Posting such a note is vastly superior to a phone call or text, which may be an unwanted interruption, or an email, which can easily get lost amidst the blizzard we all must trudge through daily. It is unusual enough to be memorable, and the trouble you went to will be appreciated. I did have a young woman once say to me, "Why did you bother to write when we live on the same block?" I responded, "Because your company was worth the effort. Opera, Friday?" She accepted.

But that wasn't the best response I ever got to my anachronistic practice of sending a note. A young woman once sent me a note in return. She tossed it through my window, with a rosebud attached. It said. "I was charmed by your note. I would like to invite you to dinner Saturday at eight. Red wine, I think."

How could I possibly have declined?

So, you've sent your note, and waited a day or two. Now you may call, or suggest another date on a chance meeting. You know the sort of thing your partner enjoys, and the sort of

thing you enjoy, so suggest it. If you are refused, fine. You misread something, but no harm is done. Time to start planning your next lunch date.

But let's say your invitation has been accepted. You've gotten to know each other a little better, so the conversation on your next date will be more personal, and more wide-ranging. You will get to know each other better, and you will begin to learn more about this fascinating person. It may come in two more dates, it may come in ten, but soon, you will know that the time has come to take the next step. You are prepared to concentrate your attention on a single partner. How and when to do that will be the subject of our next essay. I really enjoyed your company. Let's do this again soon, shall we?

Note: The next essay will contain more...intensely intimate themes. If you are so inclined, have a fainting couch nearby.

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy - Part the Sixth - Exclusive Dating

Welcome again, my Gallants! The grace of the Muses be upon you.

First, let me apologize. I hinted that this essay would deal with sexual etiquette. But as this essay grew in length and scope, I found that there was too much to be considered on two such important topics as exclusive dating and sex in the same essay. I know, you're calling me a tease, and not without justice. But please bear with me. As with physical intimacy itself, it will be worth the wait. I will write the essay on physical intimacy early this week, and post it then. Consider it a worthwhile exercise in patience!

Now, we are at a moment in which things intensify in every way. You have had several romantic dates with your partner, and they have been progressively fascinating. Having this person in your life has been a joy, and when they are with you, you feel that they bring out the best in you.

You may think that you are "in love," and perhaps you are. But as I said earlier, the enchantment of romantic feeling is the worst reason I can think of to marry. If poorly considered, a good romance can become a disastrous marriage in startlingly quick time. Enjoy the enchantment - it *is* magnificent. But don't let it strike you blind, deaf and dumb! You will do neither yourself, nor your partner any favors by rushing ahead!

It is not yet time to think about rings and invitations. The altar is in sight on the distant horizon, but you have much to think about, and much to experience before you take that perilous plunge. If the fact that I say the altar is in sight, no matter how distant, makes you thoughtful, good! It should. Being in a bad marriage is far worse than being alone, in such a way as being set on fire is worse than being caught in a chilly draft. And it makes *two* people miserable that might have been happy. Do not be the cause of that. As your relationship has developed, there may have been some level of physical intimacy - but I *do* hope you've been heeding my advice about going *slowly* in that department. *Hic sunt dracones*, my Gallants. If people bring luggage into a relationship, they bring steamer trunks into bed.¹² Many misunderstandings are waiting to spring on you, and many tears have been shed. We will discuss this more later.

And speaking of perils, I have been told that I should mention my advice on a topic I would have thought would have been obvious to people of good breeding, such as yourselves. I will put it directly as I can: If you discover that someone you are interested in is involved in a committed relationship, get out quickly and irrevocably. You need not concern yourself with any but the most perfunctory courtesy in such a situation. If their partner cannot trust their fidelity, neither can you. Ignore this rule and I can absolutely guarantee heartbreak, and perhaps worse. People who lie about this sort of thing enjoy the drama that such heartbreak brings. They are addicted to it. And sooner or later, your role will change from the illicit lover to the cuckold. If you would not wear the horns, do not give them! That being said, it is time to consider, once again, but this time, more deeply and thoroughly, the course of this relationship. It is time for more sober reflection. Return to your quiet thinking place, and ponder.

First, think about what you have seen and heard from this person. The single most important question to answer is, "are they kind?" You will have had opportunities by now to see how this person treats people that they are not obliged to be kind unto. You will have heard how they regard their co-workers, classmates, families, and former lovers. If they are condemnatory of these people, or if they take advantage of imbalances of power such as

when dealing with service personnel, *beware!* A few occasions of less than perfect patience are human, but a consistent pattern reveals a canker of the soul. Especially note how they speak of former lovers. You may, unfortunately, be one someday.

When human beings are involved in each other's lives, they will get on one another's nerves occasionally. This is inevitable - no one is always at their best. In a marriage, this will happen with some unfortunate frequency. If you want to see how you will be treated when that happens, look at how your partner speaks of former lovers. If you want tolerance, do not get involved with the intolerant. And, Lord knows, we all need great heaps of tolerance. Once you have determined this, it is time for three questions that have never, ever failed me - a legacy from my wise grandfather. As they were so generously given to me, I give them to you, my Gallants:

- 1) Is this person on your side?
- 2) Would you go into business with them?
- 3) When they are around, do you feel like you should strive to be a better person?

First, is this person someone who will take your part, and support you against the slings and arrows of life? It can be fun to be in a relationship in which constant needling and good-natured insults fly. It is miserable to be in a marriage in such a situation. When you both know each other intimately, and "good-natured" teasing is an accepted practice, when tempers flare, things will be said that will sting. Over time, these tiny pinpricks become wounds, and scars; accumulating into the gangrene of distrust. Especially avoid anyone who seems to enjoy putting you down in public. There is no dignified way to respond to such things, and anyone who enjoys them has a sadistic streak that you would be wise to avoid. Secondly, consider the fact that you are contemplating mingling your worldly fate with this person. How they handle the financial arrangements of life may not seem like a very romantic thing to consider, but much strife in marriages is caused by differing priorities regarding money. It also causes you to evaluate how this person handles risk. Your risk-taking styles need not be identical, but they must be compatible. If your partner seems reckless to you, this will be a cause of much anxiety. If they seem excessively timid, you will feel limited by your association with them. Such resentment will poison a marriage.

Finally, what does this person bring out in you? When they are with you, do you feel more optimistic about the future? Do you feel that you should be kinder and gentler? Do you have more energy for your work? Some relationships are energizing, some are exhausting and enervating. Think carefully about this - it will show you how proceeding in this relationship will affect your life ongoing.

Now that you've contemplated this useful triad of questions, consider. If you have a firm "no" on *any* of them, it is time to think about how to gently extricate yourself. It will sting on both sides at this point, but better a sting than a festering wound for either of you on down the road. If you are uncertain of the "yes" for any two of them, then seriously consider whether you want to date this person exclusively. Gather more data. Be watching for them on your next date. If you are uncertain of any one of them, caution is still called for. If you are reasonably certain of all of them, proceed to the next step.

That next step is exclusivity. You are asking for a mutual commitment to date only each other. This is a big step, which is why I have urged such careful thought. Above all, do *not* let this come about by accident. Assuming that you have an exclusive agreement leads to truly spectacular and hurtful misunderstandings.

So how do you ask for such a thing? Really, it is done like everything else you should do with your partner - gently, honestly, and with respect. It may sound something like this: "I have enjoyed our time together very much. I find you fascinating, and my feelings for you have deepened. You are important to me, and I want us to develop this wonderful thing that's growing between us. If you feel the same way, I'd like for us to date each other exclusively. I want to know more about you, and I can't imagine a better way to spend my time than to spend it with you."

If your partner balks, that's perfectly all right. You took time to consider this, so should they. There is, however, a great gulf fixed between, "not yet," and "I don't feel that strongly about you." Try hard to discern the difference. If the latter, cool things off for awhile. Don't maintain contact as frequently. Let a week pass. If they contact you, then you should get some very straight talk about where the relationship is headed. If not, then it's time to think about who you might next invite to lunch. If there is still ambiguity, then feel free to keep

dating for awhile, if you're both enjoying it, but understand that there is no exclusive agreement there on either side. You've taken a risk to make that clear. And maybe, with time, things will deepen and strengthen. Trust your intuition.

Think of this moment as a safety valve. If your partner is uncomfortable with this preliminary level of commitment, you know where you stand. There may be disappointment, but there will be no dishonor.

Now, let us say that your partner is delighted with the prospect. Wonderful! This fascinating person finds you fascinating, too. You have some level of mutual commitment in the relationship, and you are both invested in it. At this point, it is likely that physical intimacy will accelerate. As fascinating as this subject is, it deserves its own essay, and I will not disappoint.

I can't imagine a better way to spend my time. Until next time, which will be soon, my Gallants!

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy - Part the Second of Part the Sixth - Sexual Etiquette

Te saluto, my Gallants! Grace be with you.

The ancient magic has taken hold, its primal rhythms are becoming irresistible. You, and your dear partner are being drawn together in body - everything about them fascinates you. The glimmer in their eye, the gentleness of their touch tell you that the moment approaches, and the anticipation is a wonder in itself.

While this is a moment of grace, we should not forget, even in the joyous madness that is the act of love, that grace is when art meets intention. Therefore, we must not neglect our art, even in moments of seemingly wild abandon. We would not want this moment to collapse into something awkward and unfulfilling. And the organ that most craves fulfillment is the one between you, and your partner's ears.

That said, let us banish one bogeyman immediately. There is no such thing as a "kink" or "unnaturalness" when it brings pleasure to any number of *consenting adults*.¹³ There is no

room for shame in this private Xanadu, no "thou shalt nots." As long as everyone is being fulfilled, be as wild as you dare.

But to make such a wide-open, free space safe and productive, there must be open and complete communication. Getting naked together is no time to hoard secrets. Absolute honesty is called for. What you are, you are. Our proclivities in this are deep and mysterious, and often, they do not change. Whether they are products of nature or nurture is an academic question, but between you, and those you love, they are not subject to suppression or to being explained away. In this, my Gallants, you must be as brave as a lion, and as gentle as a lamb.

It may prove that you are not compatible in this. While this may be a painful realization, it is far better that you know this now, than that either (or any) of you pretend that you are something that you are not. The basic element of what you are will out. It is too profound to remain hidden forever. And even if you were to succeed in such unhealthy, masochistic self-denial for a lifetime, you would be living the most intimate and destructive of lies. It is a cheat and a fraud to do so.

For me, I am a one-on-one, assertive, heterosexual male. It is the role I am comfortable in, the one I find fulfilling, and the one that pleases my partner. There is nothing better or worse in this, and while it does not take a great deal of courage to come "out" of the most popular and crowded of closets, it is who I am. No matter who or what you are, I would encourage you to be just that, and to find someone to share your gift with. Nothing is more fulfilling.

I have tried sex with more than one female partner, while I was young and still looking for who I am. I found the experience - well - confusing and tiring. Others swear by it. It is not for them to judge me, nor for me to call them "unnatural." Such an act felt "unnatural" for *me*. To a dear friend of mine of many years, it seems the most fulfilling thing she can do. Each to their own.

Now, with that out of the way, let's talk about some practical considerations. First and foremost, if you are looking for a lifetime partner, and if you don't want to be the most complete of wretches, an informed, freely given consent is essential. If there is the slightest

doubt in your mind that your partner is fully cognizant and fully willing, don't. Intoxicants are especially dangerous. Illegal intoxicants of any kind, no matter how "harmless" are doubly dangerous. If you find yourself in a horrible situation, the slightest hint of the involvement of any illegal substance will spell your doom. A useful rule of thumb is this: if your partner is too impaired to drive, they are too impaired to consent. If you wouldn't see them drive through a sobriety checkpoint with perfect confidence, refrain.

There are many reasons for this. Obviously, you don't want to be the target of the most hideous of accusations, but even that is nothing emotionally compared to the possibility of bringing an intimate regret into the life of someone you care for deeply. Any doubt in your mind is enough to refrain. Perhaps the answer isn't "no," it is "not yet." Deferred gratification has its pleasures. Be open to it.

That said, you may have the misfortune to have struck upon someone who is deeply, intimately damaged. Oh, my Gallants, I would not wish such a pass upon you, but it does happen. Some people can never surrender themselves due to some trauma that they cannot pass. All's I can counsel in such a terrible situation is patience. Sometimes, such folks need nothing more than time, love and attention, and they will someday blossom in the light of your kindness. Some will not. If you are looking for someone to share your intimate life with, not everyone will be compatible for any number of reasons. You cannot live a lie, and you have needs as well. Weigh all this with great care, and trust your intuition.

On the other hand, I have heard it said that "If they're not interested in some level of physical intimacy by the [an arbitrary number] date, they're either "born again," or just kidding." I think this is pernicious advice, and that your intuition is a much better guide. If your relationship is growing, and all parties find it fulfilling, then what advice do you need? If it isn't, and you have been patient and gentle, again, what advice do you need?

Now, to get even more practical. There is a foolish, childish trope in romantic fiction of people getting "swept up in the moment," and falling into bed together, pretending as if this were some unaccountable accident. Rubbish. This is something you should do only with forethought and intent.

Therefore, the venue matters. I suggest "your place" for the first time.¹⁴ You are comfortable there, and you can see to your partner's comfort with ease. You can also make certain that you have certain things on hand - condoms - yes you should use them, for many reasons that are too obvious to need recounting here. A spare, fresh toothbrush in the bathroom. A clean, fresh cloth within reach of the bed. Too graphic? Trust me, this little token of care will be appreciated. Clean, fresh linens are essential. Too much forethought? Anyone who would ask, "were you that sure of me?" is either kidding, or they are still operating under the illusion that such encounters should be accidental. The appropriate response to such a question is, "I care for you enough to see to your comfort."

Now, to other, more intimate matters. How long should such an act last? Until all partners are satisfied. Technique? An ounce of sensitivity is worth a ton of skill. Pay attention to what your partner's reactions are telling you. Listen. Talk. Appreciate. Say what you like. Approach this moment as you approach everything with this fascinating, attractive person, who, by the way, obviously has exquisite taste in partners - with gentleness and honesty. There will be a time for wild abandon. The first time isn't it.

Above all things, be present. This moment, this person. Do not be concerned with how well - how expertly you are doing this, your partner's reactions will tell you all you need to know. Trust me. More importantly, trust them.

It is wise to plan for an occasion when neither of you are rushed for time. The time after is precious. Enjoy it. Be there, in happiness together.

Get up first. Make breakfast (you did see to having the supplies on hand, and that you knew how to prepare them, right?)¹⁵ Take your partner home. Give honest praise, and be grateful for this magnificent experience.

And do send flowers the next day - if flowers are their thing. It is time.

Now, my Gallant, you are in this relationship to a profound depth. It is time to return to your serious thinking place and to begin to consider one of the most profound decisions you will ever make.

That is for our next essay. Until then, be brave, be kind, and may the Graces be with you.

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy. Part the Seventh - Engagement

Strength to your hearts, my Gallants! I am delighted for you! By putting forth an effort to be honest, gentle and elegant, you have built a relationship with a magnificent person. It may be that you are considering a lifelong commitment. But you needn't think in those terms in any specific time frame, or indeed, ever.

How long should a relationship last? The answer is, “for as long as everyone in the relationship finds it fulfilling – as long as it strengthens them, and enriches their lives.” The relationship may not be all wine and roses every day, there will be times when neither you, nor your partner may feel gallant, or elegant, or even tolerant, but with some effort, you can usually push through these low places, and enjoy the rewards – deeper intimacy, stronger bonds, more reason for faith and hope.

But once you make one fateful, heroic decision, the nature of the relationship changes *forever*. Being in a long-term exclusive relationship can be marvelous, but if the time comes to part brass rags and go your separate ways, the consequences of that parting can be emotionally dire, but they are usually limited to sorrow, and some minor complications if you were cohabiting.

But once you make **The Promise** before all the world, once you jump the broom, tie the knot, get hitched, share the yoke, the whole world, the state, your families, all your extended networks of well-wishers and friends are involved in your relationship. All these parties have a stake, however small, in perpetuating your formal bond. And the consequences of failure become dire on a whole new scale.

So why does anyone get married? Why should you even consider it? Why would you ever “pop the question?” There are several reasons, some practical, such as the legal protections and advantages that come with marriage, some romantic to the point of heroism, and some supported by thousands of years of custom.

There is, however, at root, only one reason to get married: Because you want to declare to the world that you are one united whole, and that you are committing to that union forever. *Forever*. There is no such thing as a conditional marriage, and if you are going into it thinking “well, I can always get divorced if it doesn't work out,” you

are *cheating* yourself and your partner. If you are not *determined* to make this last forever, don't do it. Don't promise something so profound, and so public if you don't absolutely mean it with a whole heart, and a steely commitment "for richer or poorer, better or worse, for as long as you both shall live." This is what makes marriage a heroic, bold thing to do – an anachronistic, recklessly bold shout into the face of modern triviality and lack of courage.

Not that you should enter into such a commitment recklessly! Heaven defend you both from such colossal folly! The time has come, my dear friends, for deep and sustained reflection upon the most significant decision that you and your partner may ever make in terms of your future happiness.

Note the phrases that we use to describe marriage: "jump the broom," "tie the knot," "share the yoke," "get hitched..." all these phrases reveal something profound at the center of marital union – the commitment to *work* together; to build a bond and *labor* at it. The workmanlike metaphors reveal the most significant truth about marriage – that it takes hard, sustained effort.

You must take stock, not only of your potential spouse, but of yourself. Are *you* capable of "for richer for poorer, for better or worse, for as long as you both shall live?" Consider carefully. If a marriage is to work, you will have to surrender, not just some of your autonomy, but *all* of it. You commit yourself to this person's happiness and growth *even at the expense of your own*. And if you can't do that, or if you have the slightest doubt that your potential spouse can do that, stop. Wait. Things are going well, and there is time. But let us say that you are as certain of this as you have ever been of anything. Nothing in life is absolutely certain, but you deeply believe that this person is capable of such a lifelong, profound commitment, and that you are capable of it, too. Very well. The time has come to make the decision. Find your thinking place again, and ask those three questions that were put to you before:

First, are they on your side? You are picking your teammate for life. Perhaps the last face you will ever see, the person that will be with you as you grow old, and as they grow old. One of you will probably be beside the bed as the other draws their last breath, vulnerable,

fading, and as helpless as at the very first. Is this the person you trust for that moment? And for all the other moments in between where you are vulnerable and frightened? Can you be that person for them? Will they support you when life is at its most impossible? Will you be their support regardless of the odds?

Second, would you go into business with them? Remember, your future financial security will depend on them, and their security will depend on you. Are you a good match to partner together? If you think being financially compatible doesn't matter, you're very wrong. If money doesn't mean close to the same thing to both of you, or if at least your vision for your financial futures are not compatible, then you cannot build a household together. Believe it or not, this is probably the most common reason for marital strife.

And finally, when you are with this person, do you feel like being a better human being? This person will become the most important, most influential person you've known since your parents, and you will hopefully be with them at least as long. The influence this person has on you will be deep and profound. Does that influence make you stronger? Kinder? More hopeful for the future? Do you have that effect on them?

Think long. Sit more than once and meditate deeply on these questions. There is nothing in your life that you should consider more carefully. There probably never will be.

Take your time. I'll wait.

So now, after much mature and careful consideration, you have made your decision. Let us consider the saddest possibility first.

You have given much dedicated thought to your future with this wonderful person, and you have decided that despite the fact that they are an exceptional, exciting person that it thrills you to be with, you are certain that they will never be suited to you as a life partner.

Although you care deeply about them, there is something between you – some doubt that augurs tragedy for you both should you make The Promise.

So what should you do? Well, above all things, my gallants, we are honest and gentle, are we not? You must have a difficult talk with this person who has come to mean so much to you. You must delicately ascertain if they are expecting you to propose marriage – if they are looking forward to it, or perhaps planning to propose it themselves. If so, you must

gently, kindly, share your doubts with them. Take the greatest care that you are not projecting fault, but be firm – as much joy as having them in your life brings you, you do not see this relationship ending in a proposal of marriage.

Then, you must abide by their wishes. Perhaps they are content with what you have for now. Perhaps they are disappointed, and will wish to end your relationship. Comfort yourself with the knowledge that no matter how much pain having this honest conversation might have caused you both, not having it and going ahead with a proposal when you were unsure is very likely to cause a calamity that far exceeds romantic disappointment. It is a clear case of a painful cut today, or an amputation tomorrow.

Let us say instead that you are uncertain of the answers to these three questions. You think this person might be the person you want to build your life with, but some shadow of a doubt lingers. You are enjoying, even being strengthened by this relationship, and your partner seems to be doing likewise, but you are still uncertain on some critical point.

Continue to enjoy your time together, but broach conversation about the things that concern you – not in a “you need to fix this” way – a person does not have to be personally flawed to be an inadvisable life partner for you, but in a way that explores what this person really believes and how they live their lives regarding the topic that troubles you. You must be both gentle and wise. Remember, you are trying to get to know them better, not to “fix” a problem. You are not sent into this to “fix” you partner, you are here to strengthen and support them.

After these conversations, which take exactly as long as they take, sit and think again.

Think long and hard. Sooner or later, you will have to make this critical decision.

Circumstances may force your hand. So do your thinking, and your deciding in advance.

Now, the happiest possibility. You are certain. You have given it much painstaking thought, and you are certain that you want to build a life with this person. You are ready. So how does one propose such a colossal, heroic undertaking? The thought is daunting. This moment you are planning will be remembered forever – the story will be told and retold. Get. This. Right.

One last note: This may seem obvious, but before you ask, you should be *certain* that the answer will be an unequivocal “yes.” If you doubt this, delay. Continue to enjoy each others’ company. There will be time. And the consequences of rejecting, or having to reject a proposal of marriage are severe. Very severe.

Now, first and foremost, forget about surprise.¹⁶ Consider the fear that must seize the heart of any thoughtful person receiving an unexpected proposal. “Hey, by the way, care to dedicate the rest of your life to my happiness? Here’s a ring, and I’m looking up at you with the most hopeful eyes you’ve ever seen and only one answer will do...”

No. If you think about it for a moment, you will see that this isn’t something you want to do to someone you care about. Once you have decided, drop an unsubtle hint or two. Converse about this. Ask them what they thought was the most romantic proposal they’d ever heard of. Just a casual conversation, you understand... You’ll pick up the vibe. Remember, you’re not trying to be overly subtle here. Ask what they think about engagement rings...

Next, speak to their family, if possible. If this person has a relationship with their family, so will you. You are joining a family, and your compatibility with them is important. You need not formally ask for their blessing (and if you do, you do so out of the presence of your intended, so discussion can be free and frank,) but you should broach the topic with their most significant family, usually their parents. Again, you need not be absolutely direct, but you should discuss the topic of marriage in general terms, ask them what makes theirs successful (if it is!) and then mention the singular quality of your beloved, and your eternal gratitude to them for having shaped and guided the development of this wonderful person. You will get what you need to know. And they will probably mention the conversation to your intended. Again, anticipation is far more romantic than surprise.

A quick note. Some people do not have good relations with their relations. They may not have relations that are good. You don’t need to insist on this if the situation between your intended and their family is toxic. You will have had enough conversations with your intended by now to know if this step isn’t a good idea. It usually is a good idea, but sometimes, it just isn’t.

Now, frame the moment. Remember what your intended said about the most romantic proposal they'd ever heard of? Do something like that. Not exactly the same thing, but something with similar timbre and tone. If you can't quite figure out the venue, the place you first met is always poetic, unless one of you rescued the other from a volcano or something.

Don't know what to say? Again, honest, gallant, elegant. It could be something like this: "Of all the things I've done in my life, the best has been getting to know you. You are precious to me. You have so many qualities I admire, and being with you is my greatest joy. With you in my life, I feel I can do, and be so much more than I ever dreamed. If you feel the same way, I'd like to ask you to spend the rest of your life with me. I want to marry you, grow old with you, and share everything, good and bad, for the rest of my days. Will you marry me?"

Boom. Now, if you've done your homework, this person, so dear to you, will look at you, their eyes radiating joy and say, "Yes."

But what if they don't?

Ah, what a wretched day. Sorry, dear reader, but this possibility does exist. In fact, your humble correspondent has had to turn down *two* proposals of marriage in his time, and has been rejected once. Both sides of such a pass are blindingly painful. This is why I urge that this *not* be a surprise. But let us consider, just to assuage your fears, that the answer is "no," or "not yet."

If the answer is no, *do not ask why*. Don't! It doesn't matter, and the explanation is likely to be incredibly painful for you both. You have read this situation wrong, and blundered. The consequences will be painful, but again, you should be thankful that you have been spared the consequences of an unwise marriage, which are unspeakably dire. Be genuinely grateful for the frankness with which your proposal was treated. It is perfectly understandable to be disappointed, and to say so, with gentle dignity. Then, terminate the tragic scene as quickly as gallantry allows, and go home to nurse your wounds. Say nothing further. Make no further contact. Allow yourself to mourn. I will have more to say on endings in another

essay, but know, for now, that you have misread the situation, and the person very badly, and you don't know enough about this person to consider marrying them.

Understand two things – there is no blame to be had. This person who you so admire has given the situation careful thought and has decided that they do not want to marry you. It matters not why. You must trust them. You were willing to trust the rest of your life to their judgment, you should trust them in this. They are undoubtedly right in their decision. This doesn't mean that either of you were flawed, or selfish, it simply wasn't meant to be, and your partner saw this more clearly than you did. Cherish your good times together. You will heal, and there will be more good times in other places, with other wonderful people.

I do not think it is advisable to try to continue a romantic relationship when a proposal of marriage has been rejected. This is why I urged you to consider so very carefully. A proposal of marriage is an “all-in” bet. The pain of such a rejection – or of having been forced to make such a rejection would put an inescapable shadow on a relationship and lock it into a painful, permanent holding pattern. You are both better off without it. If your former partner contacts you again, your wisest course is gratitude, both for the many joys you shared, and for their good judgment in seeing that it was not to be. Then, be firm. It is a part of the past now. A glorious past, but done.

I speak from experience in this, my gallants. And perhaps I speak from a dark tide of remembered pain – the pain of having to reject rather than of having been rejected. But to my eyes, there is no profit in letting the mortally wounded relationship, no matter how beautiful and cherished, die a lingering, painful death.

But perhaps the answer isn't no, it is “not yet.” Be careful. Not everyone thinks about these things as carefully as we, and your partner may be wanting to say “no,” but they can't bear to reject your gallant proposal so absolutely. If the answer is equivocal, or related to some temporal event, say, “I need to finish my degree/care for my aged, infirm aunt,” or some such, then you are in a difficult position. You must withdraw, and draw upon your instincts. How did your partner react to your proposal? Did they seem genuinely pained to have to postpone an answer? Why didn't they say, “I'll marry you when I finish my degree?” Do

you feel they don't know you, or themselves well enough to make this incredibly profound commitment?

If so, you can consider continuing on with the relationship, but know that it is forever changed. Your intentions are clear now, and your partner knows that you see this relationship as headed for a lifetime commitment. That is your expectation. This will add a tension, one that may strain the relationship.

Do you see now why I said not to ask until you are sure of the answer?

Whew. Glad that part of this essay is over.

So, we will proceed assuming that all is well. You have made your proposal, and it was joyfully received. Congratulations! Now you enter a madcap dash to the altar. There will be chores, details, and annoyances – brace yourselves. All the momentum is now pushing you both to the big moment. This is the first major, life-changing thing you will do together, and you will do it in front of witnesses. Yikes.

The planning of weddings is beyond the scope of this essay, or your correspondent's expertise. Make the plan, and then appoint one of you – the one to whom the details of the ceremony matter most – the wedding marshal whose dicta are not to be questioned.¹⁷ This is no time for petty fights over trivial things.

I would only mention, because I can't help myself, that a wedding is not a performance piece. The simpler, with the fewest points of failure and an elegant brevity, the better. And that sound advice will probably be ignored.

Religious differences, family traditions, guest lists...the mind boggles. Would you mind terribly, my dear gallants, if I just take a glass of wine and go to bed, happy in the fact that I may have been of some small service in the most important part – the decision to pose the question?

Thank you, my gallants. Next time, having discussed happy endings – happy beginnings, really, I will pose the most difficult of topics – the ending of romantic relationships. This need not be disastrous, and it is worth an essay, no matter how difficult it is to consider. It is because of my regard, concern and affection for you, patient reader, that I broach the subject.

Until next time, grace, joy and wisdom be with you always.

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy. Part the Eighth - Endings

Strength to you, my beloved gallants. This is the most difficult essay I must write, and I ask that you see it through to the end. There are things you must know as you pursue a great, lifelong love; hard truths that must be said. Let's get this behind us.

I have said it before: The first thing you must remember is that all love ends in tears. There must always be a parting of the ways, be it a breaking of bonds, or by the hand of Death, the great equalizer of all our works. When you decide to love, you decide to accept the pain of separation. In the end, we are all alone.

This is not meaningless tragedy. In fact, it is the price we willingly pay. We pay it because the pain, as profound as it is, is slight compared to the joy, the happy days, the passionate nights of abandon, the years of poetry and harmony of spirit that is the prize of all our efforts – a prize that multiplies with the sharing. We love because we are brave – because we are strong. Loving is an act of profound defiance in the face of the temporal nature of life and the fickleness of fortune. All who truly love are heroic, all who love knowing and accepting that a price must be paid are something more than heroes.

So, how do we endure when the price finally must be paid? If the beloved has died, we mourn, but we rejoice. We have been loved to the very end. How many can say that? We are stronger, better people because this wonderful person chose to dedicate their days to us, and because we chose to give ourselves to them. And that strength will carry you through the darkness of mourning into whatever comes. You were strong enough to love, you are strong enough to live on.

But sometimes, the day comes when a cherished bond must be broken. You must go your separate ways, never again to be lovers. This person, who you dedicated your life to, trusted, and shared your joys and sorrows with is leaving your life. This is a cause for mourning, but it is not a cause for despair. You can get through this. You will be sadder for a time, but the sadness fades. The wisdom and strength you have gained by being brave enough to love, and by being loved will last for the rest of your days.

How do you know when the time has come to sever the bond? *Before you have taken vows*, the answer is, when one or both of you have become convinced that the relationship is no longer capable of bringing joy into your lives, or strengthening you both. When you are convinced that it is beyond repair.

There can be many causes of such a sad state. Perhaps an important promise has been broken, and you cannot believe, with absolute certainty that this person is the person that you can trust with everything about you. Perhaps, despite all your careful thought you chose wrongly, and this person is not what you thought they were. Perhaps you have both changed to the point where you are no longer a good team to face life's endless slings and arrows together. Perhaps you have both tried to recover the joy that brought you together, without success. In any event, you have thought, reflected, and above all, honestly discussed the future with your beloved, and you know to a certainty that the time has come to part ways. Of course, people who base their relationships on emotions and euphoric states – on nothing more than novelty, really, will soon find that a house built on sand will not stand many storms. But this is not you, my gallants. Nor would you choose such a person. You build your relationships on commitment, admiration, shared joy, and a determination to work together through life's troubles and the changing winds of emotion.

But despite all your careful work, the time has come. Alas.

But do not forget, regardless of what has come to pass, that this person has shared a part of your life. There are joys you shared – the time has not been without value. This person will always be precious to you. You must protect them, even in your parting. We are not ungentle, even at the end. Perhaps even *especially* at the end.

Remember, we are always brave. We do not misbehave and withdraw, hoping the other will get tired and do the breaking for us to spare us the pain and guilt. This is a cowardly, unworthy strategy, and the cause of so much pain and bad memories that it should not even be considered. If you are convinced the bond must be broken, break it. Not ungently, not without balm, but definitively and quickly. As with so many things, the time for hesitation and deliberation is before the decision is made.

I have been to this dark and painful place. Oh, it hurts to the core to remember, my gallants! To see the eyes of one you have loved fill with tears, and then become distant, never again to look upon you with absolute trust and intimacy! This is not something to be done on a whim, or in a moment of anger or frustration! I bear the guilt of having done this improperly more than once, and the shame of it is with me still.

That said, how is this supremely difficult thing to be done? You have made the decision, and you must bear the burden. In person is by far the best, if the situation allows. Would it be better to spare them the tragic scene and break up over the phone, or by some other, less personal means of communication? That is unlikely – a relationship is made up of moments, and each one, up to the end makes a memory. This last memory will be sharp for many years, perhaps forever. You must consider it as important as the very first memory, and you must give it as much care.

You should choose a venue in which your beloved feels safe. They are about to accept a blow, whether they knew it was coming or not. If you are cohabiting, the place you have shared together is not advisable – let that place be untainted by this last sorrow. If you are the one ending the relationship, you must be the one to move out, regardless of the status of leases or other arrangements, unless they express a desire to move.¹⁸ It is entirely their decision. Mundane details can be worked through later, through intermediaries if necessary. If they have a friend that you trust, ask them to come by and check on them, about an hour after you have decided the time in which to have the final conversation. That conversation should be brief and definitive. There must be nothing equivocal about it. If there is anything more painful than parting, it is uncertainty.

Something like this:

“We have had a joyous time together, but we both know this relationship is no longer helping us become the people we want to be, or bringing either of us the joy in living we deserve. It’s time to end this, to release each other to go on. We both worked hard on this, we’ve talked about where we are, and it isn’t going to get better. There is no blame to be had, we did our best, and you will always be precious to me. Always. But we have to get on

with our lives before something beautiful turns sour and poisonous. I thank you with all my heart. I will miss you terribly. I will never forget you. Goodbye.”

Then leave. Get up and leave. The time for debates and promises is past. Do not look back. Ever.

The next part is at least as hard. You must be silent. It is damnably hard - this person you cared for so much, who supported you and who you supported is suffering. All the best parts of you want to relieve that suffering – to say something, do something that will make the pain you just caused go away. But you can't. The price must be paid. You both must pay it alone. You must not contact them, you must not respond to them if they contact you. If you have a chance meeting, you must be polite and cordial, but you must not engage in discussion about the ended relationship, and you must keep the encounter brief. What is dead must be buried. At least a month should go by. This person may say hurtful things, but that is the pain talking, and it should not be taken seriously – no matter how damnably accurate the barbs are! You will receive insults and recrimination with kind patience, and move on.

Need I say that this is one of many good reasons why it is a very dangerous idea to date people with whom you work?

Believe me, my gallants, this titanic act of self-discipline is best for all concerned. It shortens the pain, avoids further damage to either of you, and above all, avoids the agony of uncertainty.

I strongly advise against entertaining the idea that a new relationship with this person will ever be possible. You took this difficult, painful course for a reason, and the memory of your parting will ever be with both of you. You see now, of course, why I have urged such caution in choosing those to whom you will give your love. There is always a cost. Always. Now, as much as it pains me to mention it, the situation is radically different if you have sworn vows. If you are married to this person, your honor is at stake, as is the sacred institution itself. You have committed your life, and all you are in a sacred vow before the world. If the vow is kept, you must keep it. You must never be forsworn. If years of hard

work, suffering and loneliness are the price, you pay it. Far better to pay that price than to be without honor.

That said, you may find yourself – and may all the powers keep you from it – in a marriage in which the oath has been irretrievably broken. You have sworn to cleave to no other, to honor and uphold one another. If that vow has been broken, you must consider what you must do, and what constitutes such profound, intimate treason – far more damnable than treason against country or cause.

The question is one of trust. If trust cannot be restored, then the bond is broken. Contact a good lawyer, and prepare yourself for the most painful experience you will ever have. The mechanics of divorce are beyond the scope of this essay, but I will say this with absolute certitude: once the decision is made, the quicker and more absolute the resolution is, the better.

There is one exception to all I have said. Physical violence is an absolute, immediate deal breaker. If someone has struck you in anger, or uses any form of violence, including threats to get their way, this person is contemptible, and unworthy of any consideration, regardless of how strong your feelings for them have been, or what excuses can be offered. Get out. Now. Your life may depend on it. This never gets better. Never. There is no relationship to break except that of violator and victim, and that relationship is one to be broken without hesitation or remorse. I have personal and professional experience with this, and if you hear nothing else I have tried to teach you, hear this – ABUSE NEVER ENDS EXCEPT IN DEATH OR FLIGHT. Fly now, and thank the Powers you are still able to flee. You deserve better than to be a victim and, it must be said, a fool.

I have never been so glad to bring an essay to a close. It was not pleasant to write, nor to read, I imagine, my gallants. But a lifetime of real love is the greatest prize that can be won, and it comes with the greatest hazards, and the highest price. If that deters you, better that you not embark on this path at all.

Courage, my gallants! Next time, we will take up a much happier topic – successful marriage. This will be the last of my essays on the topic of romance, and if you have taken all its lessons to heart, you will be wiser, stronger, and prepared for the greatest adventure

that a human being can hope to win. Glory and grace are yours, to be shared with the most wonderful person you have ever met.

Until we meet again, Grace be with you!

Rules for Romance - For Those Who'd Be Happy.

Part the Ninth and Last – Happily Most-of-the-time After.

Or

“Romance to the DEATH!”

Yes, dear Gallants, I just tried to scare you. I hope it worked. If you are not approaching the altar with some measure of trepidation, you are not paying attention. But I've covered the care and forethought with which you should approach this exhaustively, so let's get on to something far happier: How to cultivate, and enjoy a joyous, forever marriage.

You have chosen deliberately, and well. So has your partner, if I may say so. Now it all changes. The nature of romance and commitment have changed irrevocably...

...or rather, they haven't changed at all.

The only difference is that your priorities have changed. Before, you were searching for a partner, and building the relationship. Now, you have your partner, and you are building the bond between you, constantly. It is the primary project of the rest of your lives. Your first priority – above all things is the growth and happiness of your marriage and your partner. This must come before all else; career, ambition, even family. You are now “one flesh,” as the Good Book puts it. Nothing can harm or benefit them without harming or benefiting you.

First, I am going to advocate something that some of you may disagree with. You are wrong. There is no way to do what almost all of you do, and not damage your relationship far more than any positive thing that can be gained by doing it.

Do not disagree with your partner in public on any matter of substance.

“*WHAT?!*” I can hear you crying out, offended that I should ask you to put your valuable opinion aside *temporarily* for the sake of fidelity. What a retrograde notion! What an atavistic absurdity!19

Calm down. I am not saying, “don't have opinions that vary from your partner's.” After all, if two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary. I am saying that airing those disagreements in front of others does more harm than good.

You are a household now. Your fortunes are inextricably linked for life. If you fail to present a united front to the world, you risk being driven apart by people with agendas that may not be in your mutual interest. Let no one ever doubt that you are a single force, united in determination and conviction. In private, you can lovingly disagree, hash things out, air your views, and hopefully, come to consensus. You never, ever want your partner to have any reason to doubt that you have their back, or that you doubt that they have yours.

Note the “matter of substance” caveat as well. There are things that you can cheerfully disagree on, but again, be careful. You know your partner well, but tread lightly, especially if your partner seems to be worked up or insistent. Being unreasonable is far less a sin than being disloyal.

Likewise, “scoring” off each other, exercising your wit at your partner's expense in public is cruel, since a good partner will not want to respond and risk making their lover look foolish. Doing so is to your relationship what a three-pack-a-day cigarette habit is to your health. It may not kill you, but it might, and it smells bad.

Doing so in private is also corrosive, in my view. Opinions may vary on this. But if you think so, again, you are wrong. Respect and deference between partners; defending one another's dignity is more important between people who have a household together than it is among strangers. Ignore my wisdom at your peril, you wit-crackers.

Next, let me dispel a dangerous delusion that for some reason seems to linger in our culture. Buy into this folly, this hubristic nonsense, and you may well doom the both of you to misery. I will emphasize this so that it burns straight down your optic nerve to be embedded on your brain:

It is never your job to correct, criticize or discipline your partner. Never. Your role is to support, comfort and encourage them.

Of course, if your partner is doing something obviously self-destructive, you will intervene. But you must *never* do this in a spirit of condescension or judgment. Remember, no matter

what, you have promised to put this person's welfare above even your own. If you have chosen well, and carefully, taking your time and with much thought, this should never be an issue. If it is, I must advise you, with regret, to review the essay on endings.

Usually, this is not the case. As I've said, when two people abide together, they will get on each other's nerves from time to time. A little gentle humor – at your own peevishness, not at your partner – will help you get through this. Needling your partner with “wit” isn't helpful, it's hurtful. Remember, making your partner unhappy is never in your interest. And you will find, if your partner is a person of emotional strength and independence – why would you choose any other kind? - they may well “dig in” and resist your oh-so-gentle correction. If you want someone strong enough to endure life's slings and arrows, you had best accept that such a person is not putty in your hands to be shaped. Their value to you is who they are, and who they are becoming, not what you want to make them into. You will not be perfect in this. You will make mistakes. In a moment of pique, you may say, or hear something hurtful. That is why the next skill I will teach you is among the most critical you can master. Get this right, and it will benefit you both, in and out of your relationship. It is a skill so rare as to almost be hermetic, but I am here, my Gallants, to once again gift you with secret knowledge – the art of making an honest apology. “But they did wrong too!” Why should that stop you from apologizing for what *you* did wrong? Marriage is many things, but it is certainly not, in any way, a grievance contest. You are not here to “win” an argument. Herein, another thing to engrave on your gray matter, in letters of fire:

There is no such thing, inside a marriage, as “winning” an argument.

Or if you prefer a memorable, rhyming quote,,,

“He that complies against his will, is of the same opinion still.”²⁰

- Samuel Butler, “Hudibras”

An apology is not about “setting things straight.” It is about acknowledging your mistake, and making a commitment to do better. Full stop. Nothing else.

Here is how it's properly done. You acknowledge fault with out qualification, you admit that what you did or said was hurtful, you state your unreserved regret, and you commit to avoid doing it in the future and to redressing the harm you have done.

That's it. Add nothing, take nothing away.

The following statements are not apologies, they are further offenses:

“I'm sorry you got upset.”

You're calling them weak. Do so, and you may see a sudden and unwelcome display of strength that you weren't anticipating.

“I'm sorry I did this, but you caused it.”

This is not an apology in the sense we mean here. It is a defense, and a feeble one at that.

You are saying that you lost control and did something regrettable, and your weakness caused the injury to be compounded. “You made me do it!” isn't something any adult should ever say.

“I'm sorry, but I was right!”

Then why apologize? What you have just said is, “This point was important enough for me to not consider your feelings. I don't mind hurting you, so long as I'm justified.”

Don't do any of these. They Will. Not. Help. I know you probably feel wounded, and want redress. But remember, you cannot harm your partner without hurting yourself. Why say something that won't help, and will hurt you both?

Here is a sample apology. Feel free to use it as a template.

“I am sorry that I said that your cat is an ill-behaved, fanged furball whose miserable guts should be used to string a fiddle.²¹ I know you love that cat, and I hurt you by insulting it. I was wrong to say such a thing. To demonstrate my sincerity, I will clean the litter box for a week.”²²

There is not a good person alive who will not accept such an apology. Maybe not *immediately*, but if your demonstration of good will and repentance is sincere, they will relent. Sometimes, love comes bearing a pooper scooper.

A long digression, and I hope it was useful to you, dear patient and indulgent reader.

Now, aside from the giving and receiving of apologies, there is the matter of reconciling disagreements. You want to do something, they don't, or visa versa. One thing to absolutely keep in mind is this – there are very few disagreements that are more important than the relationship itself. If your partner feels strongly about something, acquiesce if you possibly

can. Getting into a fight that causes real damage is far worse, in the vast majority of cases, than going along. Of course, there are exceptions, but they are rare in the extreme. Ask yourself if you're resisting, or insisting out of pride, for which there is no place in a marriage, or to demonstrate some ridiculous concept of "independence." Get this through your skull – *you are not independent anymore*. You are part of a communal being. Your fates and happiness are intertwined indissolubly and permanently. Being stubborn because you want to show that you are capable of standing on your own is counterproductive. You've committed before God, the state, and everyone you know that you do *not* stand alone.²³

So, what is to be done when you can't go along? This will probably happen at some point – something your partner very much wants to do seems extremely unwise, dangerous, or intolerably wasteful. Or your heartfelt wish seems that way to your partner. Express your concerns in a loving, non-judgmental manner *once*. Then let it go.

And if the crash does come, if you say, "I told you so," I hope you get a terrible itch somewhere you can't scratch in public. They know. Let. It. Go. Concentrate on repairing whatever went wrong, and you'll grow closer from the experience.

Trust me, my Gallants. More importantly, trust your partner. You selected this person after much careful thought because you trusted their qualities. Time to demonstrate that faith. Besides, they had the spectacularly good taste to select you as a partner. If you have to live with hideous wallpaper, or that trip to Europe you thought you couldn't afford becomes a certainty, well, you'll get used to the wallpaper – probably – and if you let go, you'll probably enjoy the trip. Above all, avoid being a constant drag or being the one who's always doing the dragging. Consider your partner's feelings and judgment as your own, and everything will come right in the end. Really. Now let's talk about sex. When you have lived with someone for years, decades, what may sometimes feel like centuries, your ardor will cool a bit. You will both get older, hopefully, and the raging flames of passion will settle to warm, glowing embers. This is natural, and not something to be feared. There may be times when one or both of you will hit an extended dry spell. Again, if neither of you is frustrated, this is not a cause for concern. If you want more sex, let your partner know. Flirt

a bit more. Be suggestive. If your advances are rebuffed, avoided or deflected, try not to take it personally. People's desire for sex fluctuates. It never really dies away if both of you are healthy (if not, it's a medical problem – see your doctor) and with patience, all will be well.

Now, if it's novelty you want, that's ridiculously easy, so long as you don't mind taking a risk and perhaps feeling a bit foolish. Try something new. Make a suggestion. If your partner reacts negatively, ask what they might like to try. One of the advantages of being in a long-term relationship is that there is plenty of time for frank, loving conversation. And never, ever stop dating your partner. Never. A long walk will do, sometimes. Other times, you may want to dress up and go out on the town to whatever standard you both enjoy and can reasonably afford. Never, ever stop romancing your partner. Why would you stop doing something you worked so hard to perfect, my Gallants?

If your partner is prone to depression, and some of the best, most creative people are,²⁴ there will be times when nothing will avail. Remember - depression is like the weather – there's usually nothing you can do about it, it will pass in time, and your role is to be supportive and available. If it persists for months, again, this is a medical problem, like any other medical disorder and it should be in the hands of your physician. It says nothing about you if either you or your partner are depressed.

But mark me well, Gallants; blame has no place in this discussion. None. If someone has lost interest in sex, it is not a sign that they don't love you anymore, or that their commitment is flagging. Never let that thought abide, it will bring you both nothing but misery, and it will make solving the problem more difficult.

By the way, I don't intend to insult you, I know by now that you understand what “commitment” means. But banish the thought of breaking your vows. You are not the kind of wretch to be forsworn, I'm sure, but I can assure you that doing so will damage your bond, and will lessen you in your own eyes if you are more than a worm.²⁵

That said, what if, Heaven forefend, your partner breaks their vow? This is not an easy thing to say, and many of you may disagree, but to my mind, this is a deal breaker. The intimate bond between you has been betrayed. A marriage may survive it, but it is hard for

me to see how the bond of trust can be absolute after such a thing has been done. Again, refer to the essay on endings, and accept my deep sorrow for your loss.

Perhaps you disagree. Very well. I wish you great good fortune, and I admire your daring. I do not at all think you are being foolish by accepting a heartfelt apology, and trying to save the most important relationship in your life. But do understand that what the two of you were attempting against the odds and the social tide just got exponentially harder. Again, my sympathy, and my salute to your courage. But I cannot, in good conscience, recommend it.

What if a more delicate problem has come to pass? If your partner can no longer have sex for physical reasons, then this is no different than if they had been the victim of an accident, or a disease. For better or worse, remember? Be steadfast. You will not regret your constancy in the end.

Still more difficult, what if something has changed, and you can no longer find your partner attractive? What if physical health is important to you, and your partner has put on fifty pounds and you just can't anymore?²⁶ Well, it will do you precious little good to pretend. Some things cannot be faked convincingly over time. As I said earlier, sexually, we are what we are.

That said, your relationship was not built on sex. Sex is a flower, not a fruit. The fruit is your mutual support, trust, and affection. Concentrate on those things, and you will find, with time, that your sexuality will come around. Remember that wanting to be with the person you love sexually is natural, and your nature will adapt to new realities.

Again, that said, do your best to be attractive for your partner. Staying healthy and vigorous at any age is part of your commitment to the relationship. And to yourself. There is never a reason to "let yourself go." It's disrespectful. You don't have to badger your partner into being a "workout warrior" or become one yourself, but maintaining your health is more than a good idea, it's a *duty*. Dress well, with an eye toward what your partner finds attractive. If your partner seems to be going down the path to frumpy, all that you can reasonably do is set a good example, and compliment them when you see something you like.

Remember it is never your place to discipline or punish your partner. Badgering and brow-beating will get you nowhere. But you know that by now.

Finally, the single most important thing to ensure a happy, lifelong marriage. Accept the fact that you are not, and are never going to be perfect, but you should always, every day attempt to improve in being a partner to the love of your life. Every day, when you wake, ask yourself, “how, today, am I going to help my partner feel loved and appreciated.?” And do that. And again. And again. For as long as you both shall, happily live.

Epilogue

We have come to the end of our time together. Oh, my Gallants, I shall miss our little chats! And I haven't said more than a fraction of what I wanted to say, but I've taxed your patience enough! You read this hoping to find a way to romance, and I hope I have been of some small service to you, and to your lovely, discerning partner, whether they are beside you now, or whether they are yet to make their magical entrance into your life. It will come, and if you work at it, it will be magnificent; the adventure, joy, and art of a lifetime. Be ready for love, believe in it. Work at it. Be kind, thoughtful, brave and wise. Take joy in all you do.

I wish you courage, wisdom and happiness abounding.

Your obedient servant,

Peregrinus

1 These essays are designed to be useful to any and all genders. I could be very wrong, but I doubt that the rules that I intend to propose are very different for relationships that are not cisgendered. The rules for Broadway musicals written in the late 1950's are much more codified, however, and I choose not to do violence to quotes, regardless of their regrettable transgressions.

2 I am male. The love of my life is female. While I have gone to some lengths to be as useful as possible to anyone with the kindness and patience to read these essays, perhaps you should keep that in mind when evaluating my perspective. As to my personal views, I

subscribe in these matters to absolute respect for love in all its forms and manifestations. If you would love, I salute you, wish you well, and want to be what help I can.

3 But if you do, you're a hero of romance, and should be revered for such a feat. Send me the sonnet, and I will send you a certificate, or perhaps a responsive couplet.

4 Obsession is not love. It focuses on the feelings and desires of the obsessed, while love focuses on the happiness of the other.

5 By this I mean you have a mutual acquaintance who has spoken to you both in each other's presence. People don't often make introductions nowadays. A pity, since it's a very useful tool. It used to be that if your mutual acquaintance didn't introduce you to each other, they were gently hinting that in their judgment, you would not make good social company for each other. Now, it's probably just lack of social gorm on the part of your friend.

Introduce people. Or don't. But do it intentionally.

6 Subterfuge? Perhaps, but a little subtlety in romance is not amiss, and it is certainly acceptable behavior at this stage. Besides, you will have other uses for those pens, I promise you.

7 Once, in a moment of wild abandon, I asked a woman, "How would you like to be romanced, treated like the fascinating person you are, at lunch in broad daylight where you can flee instantly if you feel the need?" She laughed, and accepted. Not a recommended protocol at all, but in this case, it worked.

8 It is not necessary to be a comedian. Telling endless jokes, performing, makes you look like a self-absorbed clown. Pay less attention to how your performance is going over, and more attention to getting to know this person, and paying them honest attention.

9 Yes, this happened.

10 And this.

11 In my war stories, I call all my bad dates "Wallinda." I'm not sure why. Probably because I never actually met anyone named "Wallinda."

12 Never, ever look in the trunk. You may find something horrific. Or worse...a sign that says "RESERVED FOR [Your Name Here.]

13 I am assured I have to say this, even though I think it's obvious – criminal behavior is obviously and explicitly excepted.

14 If you trust someone enough to have sex with them, you can reasonably trust them enough to let them know where you live. And, I shouldn't have to say this, but *do* tidy the place. You're trying to communicate to this person that you care enough to take trouble for them.

15 A conversation about dietary matters and food preferences should have been had long before this. And it needn't be elaborate. Coffee, toast, a scrambled egg, or whatever is fine. Put clothes on, despite what you may have seen in a questionable movie. Grease popping onto a sensitive area is a real mood killer.

16 I beg you! PLEASE forget about surprise. The potential for disaster...I shudder...

17 A bit of advice specifically for cisgendered males: She has been told since she was small that this is “her special day.” She may well have been dreaming of it since she got over the idea that boys have cooties. You, on the other hand, probably have no flipping clue about it. In my own case, I told my intended that she could have things however she wanted them; that I would show up with my groomsmen properly attired, reasonably sober, and I had little else to say on the matter. This suited her and her mother down to the ground.

18 I don't care if you never get “things” back. You shouldn't either. There are things more important than “things.” Such arrangements are best made through mutual friends, if necessary.

19 I freely admit that I included “atavistic absurdity” because I like the look and sound of it, and just to show off my hypertrophied vocabulary. But if you've gotten this far my Gallants, you're used to it. Sorry about that.

Not really sorry.

20 Obviously, this applies to any or all genders, but the quote is what it is. As Mary Wollstonecraft quoted it in this form in “Frankenstein,” I have the imprimatur of the grandmother of all literary feminists on its use with this wording. So there.

21 The answer to the question that is probably circling your mind right now is, “yes.”

22 You will note here the complete absence of defense. There is no use in pointing out the cat's flaws, or that your partner's attachment to it seems incomprehensible to you. You are apologizing, not advocating. And besides, the cat doesn't like you either. You snore, and you have sex with its person when that person should rightfully be petting, amusing or feeding the cat. Which is always. Always.

23 “Co-dependency” is a pernicious, unhelpful nonsense word that you should banish from your vocabulary as far as your marriage is concerned. Being “co-dependent” in a marriage isn't a vice, it's the *goal*.

24 Not that I am one of the “best, most creative people,” but I suffer from the Midday Demon. My wife knows that especially between Christmas and my birthday in late February, I am likely to live at the bottom of a dark well. She adapts to this like a champion, and I redouble my efforts to show her appreciation as soon as I'm not consuming all my energy just to get out of bed in the morning and get to work. Twenty years of this, and we've learned to engineer around it. You will, too.

25 Worms have sex blindly, in obedience to biological urges. Humans, ideally, have sex as an expression of trust and intimacy. Don't be a worm.

26 We are not talking about normal aging here. You committed to grow old together, and bodies change. No one is twenty-one forever. On this, grow up. You're not getting any younger, either. Remember that sexual desire does die down with age. While it is still there, and flares up with vigor from time to time, expecting your partner to look the same at sixty as they did at twenty-five is childish. Besides, experience *does* matter, especially when you've spent decades getting to know each other. And as Benjamin Franklin observed, “in the dark, all cats are gray.” Get creative, have fun. It's there to be had. Trust what you have built together.