

Recipes for a Perfect Marriage

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Prologue

The heart of a recipe, what makes it work, is a mystery. Taste is such a personal thing and yet the right recipe can open a person's senses to a food they thought they didn't like. Then again, you can put all the right ingredients together, follow the instructions exactly and still have a disaster on your hands.

That's how it has always been with me and my Grandma Bernadine's brown bread. I would do exactly as she showed me, but it would always come out a little too crumbly, or doughy, or hard.

'You're too fussy,' she'd say. 'Put some jam on and just eat it anyway. It'll be different again tomorrow.'

And it was always different. But it was never right.

Like my marriage to Dan.

They say you just *know* the man you are going to marry. That's how it's supposed to work. You date guys, sleep with them, live with them - get through your twenties having fun falling in and out of love. Then one day you meet this man and you just know he is 'The One'. He's different from everyone else you have ever met. You feel happier, more special, more alive when you are with him. So you get married.

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For two weeks you are Barbie and Ken. There's a big show-off wedding in the Plaza, and you wear a white meringue of a dress even though you are over thirty. You spend what should be the down payment for your first home on fourteen days in the Caribbean.

Then, when you get your 'Ken' home, you realize he was an impulse buy. You wanted the 'married' label so badly that you didn't think it through, and now he doesn't look as good as he did under the spangly lights of singleness. He doesn't fit you properly either; although you convinced yourself he'd be suitable for everyday use, you now find him uncomfortable and irritating. He has cost you your freedom; he is the most expensive mistake you will ever make. You have been married for less than three months and everything he does and everything he says makes you scream inside: *'For the rest of my life! I can't live with this for the rest of my life!'*

But you don't say it out loud because you are ashamed of having made such a terrible, terrible mistake. Even though you despise him for the way he clips his toenails in bed, you know it is not grounds for divorce. You know that this silent torture you are living with is entirely your own fault for marrying him when you didn't really love him. Not enough, certainly. Now that you think back on it, did you ever love him at all or was it all just about you desperately wanting to get married? Because surely love is too strong to allow these petty everyday annoyances to turn into hatred. Love is bigger than this. Love doesn't make mistakes. Not real love. Not the kind of love that makes you marry someone.

By the seventh week the statistic that one in four marriages ends in divorce cheers you and you have decided that six

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months is a respectable amount of time to be seen trying to make it work.

Except that you know you haven't. Tried, that is. And you can't help thinking that perhaps you are just part of a generation of women who find marriage a challenging and difficult state of being.

Or perhaps there is no universal group, no zeitgeisty cliché to hide behind.

In which case I am just a woman who married the wrong guy and is trying to find a way out.

Chemistry

It either works or it doesn't work

Gooseberry Jam

Jam, in itself, is not difficult to make, but the quality of the fruit is important and key to this is when you pick it. Fruit contains its own thickening agent, pectin, which is only present in the fruit when it is just ripe. Too early and the fruit will thicken but taste sour; too late and the fruit will be sweet, but the jam runny and weak.

Gooseberries are ideal because they grow wild and in abundance in this part of the country. Add 4lb sugar to 3lb gooseberries and boil them hard in a metal pot with one pint of water. It is important not to turn the heat down; the fruit must keep boiling throughout the process, otherwise the jam will be no good. To check if the jam is ready, decant a spoonful onto a cold plate. As it starts to cool, gently push with a spoon to one side. If it wrinkles on the top, it is ready. Put into jars sterilized with boiling water and seal immediately.

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Jam is so simple to make – just fruit, sugar and water – yet the success of it hinges on chemistry, which is quite tricky to control. The jam has to be heated to a ferocious boil, then kept there for just the right amount of time, until it is ready to solidify.

If the heat is not right to start with, the thickening process will never kick off. If it over-boils, the jam becomes cloying and thick. Then sometimes you can have the best-quality ingredients, apply just the right amount of heat and, for some reason, the chemistry just never kicks in at all.

Sound familiar?

Dan is an ordinary guy. I don't mean that badly; being an ordinary guy is a good thing. What I really mean is that he is ordinary to me and that is the problem.

Was I ever in love with him? I just don't know any more. I made the ultimate declaration of love on our wedding day and somehow, in the hugeness of the gesture, I lost the clarity of what love was. Lost faith in the feeling that made me say 'yes' to him in the first place.

Dan is great. Really. Just not for me.

I met him about a year and a half ago (if I loved him, I would be able to remember exactly), although I guess, in a

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weird way, he had been knocking about on the edge of my life before then. He was the superintendent in my apartment building. 'Don't sleep with your building super!' I hear you cry. Basic rule of being a single woman in Manhattan. Your water pipe bursts: who are you going to call? You stay friendly, you flirt when you have to and at Christmas you tip. It is one relationship you *don't* mess with.

Unless you are so sad and desperate that you are afraid of turning into one of life's lonely: the lingering huggers, the abandoned wives who book a lot of aromatherapy and have begun actively to crave a human touch.

The New York singles scene was tough.

There were the players: high-maintenance, competitive husband-hunters, manicured, buffed, styled-up peak performers. Then there were the rest of us, just bumbling through the bars forgetting to change out of our work shoes, borrowing a friend's lipstick as an afterthought, knowing that we were never going to meet a man if we didn't start making an effort. All of us were trying to look as if we didn't care, pretending that what really mattered to us was each other. Maybe I'm cynical, but behind the glimmering cosmetics and the carefully poised insouciance, I always saw just a lot of brave faces. In the eyes of my closest girlfriends, I knew that, ultimately, I was an emotional stand-in for the man they hadn't met yet. We were co-commentators on each other's lives, important to each other's emotional survival, but not integral. Men, marriage, children: as we buffed and polished and shone through our thirties this life cycle was turning from a birthright to a dream.

I was bad at pretending.

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Reared in that liberal single-mom-by-choice way that never feels entirely sure of itself, my role models for love were my maternal grandparents. James, my grandfather, was the local schoolteacher in their small village and my grandmother Bernadine was a wonderful housekeeper and cook. I visited with them for at least two summer months each year as a child and benefited from the warmth they so clearly felt toward me and each other. Their marriage provided my childhood with a structured, traditional environment so different from the permissive, unpredictable upbringing I had with my bohemian artist mother – their daughter, Niamh. The long summer days were taken up entirely with simple household chores: James tending to his vegetable garden, Bernadine baking bread and allowing me to dust her kitchen in flour. My grandparents were not physically demonstrative, but their love was obvious in all the little things they did for each other.

Bernadine and James were married for fifty years and I remember as a teenager wondering at the miracle of love that would keep two people together for almost three of my lifetimes. My grandmother outlived my grandfather by eight years. The legacy they left in my heart was my ambition to find a man with whom to have a relationship like theirs. A romance so strong that it could last out half a century.

I always knew that I wanted to be married. I dated losers and bastards and nice-but-not-right guys. Marriage was too important a state to compromise on. I knew that much, and once or twice I fell in love and had to pull myself back from the brink of a big mistake. Although, looking back now, I realize it is always better to follow your heart than your head.

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In the end I married one of the nice-but-not-right ones because my head told my heart that this could be my last chance. Biology and bad luck conspired and conned me into a feeling like love. With Dan, it was never the real thing and it needs to be. Fake love won't last the course. It's naive to believe otherwise.

I was having one of those indulgent afternoons that you can have when you live alone. And I don't mean the pampering 'home-spa' type that you see in the magazines. I mean the phone-off-hook feeling sorry for yourself kind. It didn't happen very often, but maybe once a year (often around my birthday) I'd take the day off work and stay in bed feeling miserable. It was nothing as serious as depression, just my twisted version of 'me' time. Other girls did meditation and yoga. I took to my bed with a quart of Jack Daniel's and a six-pack of chocolate muffins. After twenty-four hours of watching off-peak TV, I would emerge longing to see my friends and generally more content with my lot in life.

Being self-employed meant that sometimes I could indulge myself. After a lucky break early on I had worked my way up the food-magazine ladder, from kitchen assistant to recipe tester and stylist's assistant to senior food writer and stylist. Somewhere around five years ago I became tired with the politics of publishing, the suits and the smarming and the exhaustion of having to go into an office every day. I took a chance that I would get work as a freelance and on my thirty-third birthday resigned my post as senior food editor on America's top-selling food magazine. Within days I was approached by an agent and

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have since published three moderately successful recipe books. I also design and test recipes for food companies and enjoy a peculiar but nonetheless lucrative sideline as a kitchen-design consultant for wealthy hostess wives. I have a good reputation in the food industry and my work is 'out there', which means I am always in the running for a big break; there is talk of TV.

So I was the typical child of the baby-boomer generation. Brilliant career, brimful of confidence, leads to offer – love life an unmitigated disaster. My decision to hibernate the day I met Dan had been triggered by the tail end of a hurt from yet another jerk. After fifteen years as a leading food writer, you would think I might have learned about the 'up-coming chefs and photographers' syndrome. Those men whose delicate egos lead them to want to reveal a work contemporary as flawed, weak, female. The only comfort to be had from being shat upon by male food 'talent' was that there were so damn many of them that they weren't as unique or individual as they believed. Oh – and very few of them had talent. Except at getting unmarried thirty-something women into bed, which, in my own sullied experience, took little more than two vodka Martinis and rather less charm than I could ever admit to.

However, it is sobering for a woman to realize she is old enough and powerful enough to be career-climbed. Sobering enough, in any case, to justify a day off work getting drunk.

Ronan, the chef, was a classic non-romance; we had sex, I thought he would call and he didn't. He turned up two weeks later at a launch with a model on his arm. I tried to be cynical, but when you get to a certain age bitter

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looks too ugly so you have to absorb the hurt. It had been a petty puncture, but I was feeling deflated and sad when Dan walked into my life.

‘Fire drill, Ma’am . . .’

Our building supers changed every couple of years, largely because their allocated apartment was a dingy, windowless hole in the basement of our building. I had been away on a photo shoot when Dan had done his ‘new-super’ tour of the building. I guess he had been there a few weeks before I met him.

‘Ma’am, I am going to have to ask you to participate in our fire drill.’

I hate to be called ‘Ma’am’. It makes me sound old and cranky.

‘Ma’am, it is for your own safety.’

So I become old and cranky.

And in this case also drunk.

I flung open the door: ‘You expect me to stand out on the street dressed like *this!*’ – and I waved my pyjama-clad arms at him. Then I slammed the door on the answer to my own rhetorical question: ‘No? Well then, fuck OFF!’

As I was doing so it hit me in a vast swell that our new super was incredibly handsome. Not just those acceptable good looks that combined with personality can turn an average man into a real prospect. No, he had those ludicrous, chiselled, shaving-cream ad looks. The kind of looks you sweat over as a teenage girl, then grow out of as soon as you realize that male models are way out of your league or invariably gay.

Of course, an intelligent woman in her mid-thirties knows that looks are not important. Especially as she

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brushes the crumbs of her fourth chocolate muffin from the ridges of her Target flannel nightgown. It is what's on the inside that counts, which, in my case was apparently a lot of bourbon and gas.

I must have seen something in Dan's eyes during our few-second exchange, some germ of desire, because – for no apparent reason – I did a clean-up on myself. Not a full leg shave or anything as extreme as that, but through the drunken haze a bit of tooth and hair brushing went on and the nightgown got exchanged for something a bit sexier, which, let's face it, didn't have to be much more than a clean pair of sweats.

Dan came back an hour later when the drill was over and, while I was not surprised at him calling back, I remember being shocked that he really was as handsome as I had first thought. More shocking still was the way that these melting hazel eyes were gazing at me with some undisguised lust/admiration combo. Like I was the most beautiful woman on earth. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before and it made me feel like laughing. I invited him in and he hesitated by the door, like household staff at a duchess's cocktail party.

Seducing Dan was the easiest thing I have ever done. Normally I sit back and wait to be asked. I don't take much persuading, but I have never taken the lead before.

But this guy looked so nervous, so smitten, that it made me feel certain of myself. Confident.

The sex was fantastic and he loved every inch of my body in a way that astonished me. He was heartbreakingly handsome, and there was something comforting and safe

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about being with him right from the start. But while I was flattered, I knew, deep down in my gut, that Dan was not my type.

I am attracted to intellects, not bodies, and we had nothing in common.

When I look back on it now, I worry that I seduced Dan for no other reason than I felt dirty and drunk and lonely. Oh, and of course – because I could. A toxic combination that was eventually legitimized by our marriage.

Hardly grounds for a happy one.