

## SULKING



In love, we are liable to be, by instinct, ferocious sulkers. It's not a terribly nice thing to own up to but the impulse is quasi-universal. Behind the sulk lies a deeply interesting, problematic and almost touching conviction. The sulker is gripped by the idea that being properly loved means being perfectly understood by someone else.

Sulking builds on some occasional deeply wonderful moments of childhood – typically repeated in the opening days of love – when we have the astonishing experience of being intuitively grasped by someone else in small and large areas. When we sulk, we're silently referring to this beautiful notion and insisting that our partners live up to it. They naturally cannot. We wanted to tell them about our day, but they went on about the plumber. They went out and bought the wrong kind of ironing board without asking us – and it cost too much; they were deep in conversation when we were ready to leave the party... All these errors we may punish with vibrant and extensive sulks.

Ungracious though a sulk can seem, it is in fact a hopeful expression of love because when we sulk, we are assuming that the other person has an almost magical insight into our minds. This is sweet but – in the long-term – very dangerous. We should never hold it against our partners that they need to have our intentions and feelings explained to them very patiently and without aggression. The real sign of love is not magical insight; it is the willingness to explain and to listen calmly.

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## IN PRAISE OF COMPROMISE



The word compromise sounds deeply miserable; the ideal is to be with someone we don't need to compromise with at all. There's a special scorn for couples who stay together not because of great and powerful love for one another but for unromantic, pragmatic reasons: for the sake of the children, because they've realised there's no-one better out there; or because they don't feel they could cope very well on their own.

This sounds bad only when set against a soaring vision of what a marriage might be: a union of souls, an ever more perfect emotional symbiotic tie. Yet such marriages are desperately rare. So it's not really a fair benchmark. We don't compromise because we've given up on love, but because we've got a more accurate idea of what relationships can realistically be in the long term.

A wiser option sees marriage as rightly and honourably having a practical dimension: it is an economic alliance, an arrangement for bringing up a family, a domestic management team, a social partnership, an insurance policy for old age. These are deeply serious and dignified human projects. It isn't our duty to sacrifice them because the flame of mutual delight has died down.

The dignity of compromise, and the burden of maturity, is built around the idea that in order to do certain important things we have to give up on others: not everything nice is simultaneously available. Of course we always know this is true, but we push it out of our minds around marriage. Couples who compromise are not the enemies of love: they may be at the vanguard of understanding what lasting relationships truly demand and what they are for. They deserve admiration, not condemnation.

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## READING SIDE BY SIDE IN BED



For once we've taken an early night. Even if it's just for a little while, we're side by side, each absorbed in a different world. One of us might be in a submarine beneath the arctic ice floe, the other is flitting through the salons of 18th century Paris, but our toes touch every so often, we stretch a hand back to briefly massage the nape of our partner's neck before turning a page.

It's very nice – modest, comfortable and rather sweet. We're not in the midst of a heart to heart conversation, we're not engaged in passionate sex, we're not celebrating each other's triumphs or heading to the airport for an exciting mini-break. But reading in bed together represents a major achievement. There's not really anyone else we could do it with.

When we think of what marriage is for we don't often think of small pleasures like this: buying a cheap old vase at a market and a few flowers on the way home; sitting on the floor together and sorting the socks after the wash; watching a TV drama together episode by episode; rinsing and drying the glasses when the friends who came round to dinner have left; assembling a flat pack bookcase and realising you've both got the instructions wrong and that it doesn't matter.

A marriage will inevitably contain serious problems – because two complicated, independent people can't join their lives without friction. We tend to be more aware of the troubles than of the pleasures. Not because the pleasures aren't there but because we don't always see what an impressive and important element they really are. We take them for granted, we don't properly appreciate their uniqueness. It may lack glamour, but being able to read in bed together is a major feat; and a sign of deep love. We may be doing better than we think.

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## DATE NIGHT



We've co-ordinated our diaries, maybe got in a baby sitter, found a restaurant we both like. Perhaps it doesn't happen so often these days. It's an important moment. But then we can end up being rather silent or talking about how nice the mozzarella salad is or what a colleague said in a meeting that morning. We've got the opportunity to really talk, for once, but then can't quite rise to the occasion.

It is no insult to a relationship – or to our intellects – to realise that it may be hard to summon up the questions that are truly going to reopen the channels of feeling between ourselves and our partners. We may require a level of artificiality to get to the sort of conversation we could most profitably have.

Here then are some of the more intimate, frustration-releasing questions that we might systematically ask one another as we work our way through the courses:

- In what ways have I hurt you?
- When do I satisfy you?
- Where do you feel underappreciated?
- What would you like me to apologise for?
- How have I let you down?
- What do you need from me?

Such conversations, handled without recrimination or defensiveness, can save love. They can also help sex to go better, given how often a desire not to be touched is – at heart – the legacy of pent-up irritation and hurt.

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