Husbanding

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The noun *husband* derives from two Norse words: *hus*, meaning house, and *bondi*, meaning occupier, cultivator, tiller of soil. This is all he is, and none of it. A myth, a seed, a companion, a jailer, a well-worn quilt of even squares. A strip of fine cloth, knotted firmly round the wrists. A web of sunlight in green water. A light-footed shadow nipping at your heels.

With infinite possibilities, how does a woman choose?

*Apple Stems*

Girls begin twisting apple stems at the age of five or six. In order to glean some insight to the name of her future husband, a girl grips the stem of her Jonathan or Pink Lady between two stubby fingers and recites one letter of the alphabet with each twist. When the stem pops off, the first letter of his name is revealed.

A girl learns quickly that she has a degree of control over her fate, depending on the vigor of her twists. If little Martin, for example, holds the key to her heart, she must, at first, twist gently, in order to uproot the tender fortune-teller upon arriving at the letter ‘M.’ With this in mind, a mother who wishes to see her sweet son married off is wise to grant him a name beginning with a letter falling not too early—but certainly not too late—in the order of the alphabet. Everett, Gregory, Hal, and Isaac are excellently marriageable names. J also lies at a strategic point in the alphabet, but J’s run the risk of extensive competition. Xaviers and Zacharys
are rarely selected as husbands by the apple stem.

**Watermelon Seeds**

A girl stands with her friends, barefoot in July grass. She is ten. All the girls gnaw their watermelon slices down to the crisp white rind, and each saves three seeds in her sticky palm. There is a great deal of giggling. The girl names each seed after a male she wishes for her future husband: Derek, from school. Alex, her favorite cousin, who is sixteen and bought her a box of sparklers on the 4th. And Toby, from dance class at the YMCA. She sticks the slimy seeds to her forehead. As the seeds dry, they drop and are lost in the grass. The last seed clinging is the lucky, faithful one. (It’s Toby. Her heart rejoices.)

In a variation, girls will name each other’s seeds, choosing notoriously undesirable boys for their friend’s. These stinky, poorly dressed, or knock-kneed boys add an element of danger and mockery.

*Note: The watermelon seed method is decidedly unproven. There is little evidence or testimony supporting its accuracy and the pool of candidates is notably small, as the girl has only ten years to draw from. She still has many, many men to meet.*

**Odor**

Dogs have over 200 million olfactory cells packed into their small, moist noses. If a young dog is trained to identify certain characteristics in a man, it can be a useful tool in the selection of a husband. It is well-known that dogs take a liking to some people and demonstrate immediate aversion to others. The trick in creating a dog that can successfully identify potential husbands is in teaching it to distinguish the scents of particular personality traits.

A family with a good deal of foresight will consider their daughter’s eventual marriage when she is still a girl. Young children and young dogs delight in each other’s company, so this is a convenient time for a family to acquire a pup. On a
Saturday morning, or some October afternoon when the leaves are spiraling and the girl is home from school, eating an apple or racing around the backyard with her new dog, her parents can call her in and seat her at the table. Mother sits beside her with a pen and a sheet of paper and the interview begins.

“Darling,” Mother says. “I know you are but a girl and your future is still unknown—goodness, you’ve only begun school this year, and we’ve yet to take you abroad. There are so many, many things you will do in your future, and so many, many things you may never have a chance to do. None of us has any idea. But one thing we can almost count on is that someday you will wish to marry.”

The girl is solemn. That she will grow up, that she will be tall and her hands will be spotted and creased, that she may care about a man or men: these are strange abstractions. Time barely exists, but she nods to her mother and her mother continues.

“If you will, Dear, please tell me what you might like your husband to be. Think about what you like in your friends, what you like about your father and myself. I’m going to take some notes. Say whatever comes to mind, dear.”

And the girl will say silly things, of course. That she wants to marry someone with a large collection of teddy bears. That she wants someone who will let her walk around the house in his shoes, someone with soft, smooth cheeks, like her mother’s. But there will be other things as well. There will be enough to get started on the training.

If she likes her mother for her soft voice, and for the way she smooths her daughter’s brow, the dog will be trained to smell the sweet ginger of gentleness. If her best friend is funny, and offers ideas for building shrines of oranges to the god of midnight, and of dead crickets to the god of music, the dog may be trained to wag its tail at the detection of divine gratitude (vaguely sweet, something of butter), or at the anise scent of creativity. A girl who likes to sneak into the attic or who stares, unabashed, at every stranger on the street—her dog must learn to smell the warm pungency of a curious and open mind. Almost every dog will learn to identify the acidity of betrayal and the dark plum of aggression. The fibrous, reedy scent of ambition is tricky, merging as it does with the bitterness of an insatiable
appetite for power. Genetic baldness: metallic. And lethargy: a sponge left too long in the sink. A dog must learn to growl at these. It must be taught to scratch madly at the curdled milk of pedophilia and to settle comfortably at the feet of one smelling faintly of walnuts, for he possesses compassion.

*Checklist*

Much later in a young woman’s life, when someone has pressed her with practicality, she may devise a checklist. She no longer wishes to be a ballet dancer or a truck driver. Her hair has gone through a succession of styles of varying lengths. She has adopted modern practices, like purchasing a cellular phone and putting artificial highlights in her hair. Her eyebrows are wonderfully, archingly shaped and her upper lip is waxed to the smooth hairlessness of a two-year-old’s. She mills about the country club clutching a designer handbag, watching young men in pressed linen stroll by, batting a lash at the ones with gleaming teeth.

A checklist will help her narrow the candidates and ascertain she does not find herself bogged down with an obvious dud. Checklists vary from girl to girl, depending on individual tastes:

- Possesses a sense of humor
- Taller than 6 feet
- Has brown eyes
- Wants children
- Smells like Ivory soap
- Smells like oak leaves
- Loves dogs
- Loves his mother
- Has a decent job
- Has a varied and rampant sexual appetite

Men are easily eliminated on the basis of a checklist as well:

- Too self-centered
• Not romantic enough
• Laughs too loudly
• Has slept with too many women
• Too smart
• Is a workaholic
• Has eczema
• Has pale, gleaming skin
• Believes in God
• Doesn’t believe in God
• Has a varied and rampant sexual appetite

Advice

A young woman asks her elders for advice. “You’ll know,” they tell her. “You’ll just know.”

Geese

In a remote corner of the northern Midwest there is a unique tradition. When a girl of respectable upbringing reaches marriageable age her family hosts a tremendous party. It is held in the fall and the entire county is invited. The afternoon is spent pressing cider, chewing sweetened pine sap, and mingling. The young woman speaks with every eye-catching young bachelor. As discreetly as she can, which is not discreetly at all since the partygoers watch closely, she pulls the most interesting men aside and invites them to the “stoning.” If a young man is in attendance out of duty and not desire—his parents are friends with her parents, or his heart is spoken for, or he finds the young woman unattractive—he can opt to build the fire that will be needed later, or he can tactfully disappear before sunset.

When the sun slides low and the sky is streaked, she takes her selected men, a group of no more than five or six, on a tense little stroll. The earth at this time of year is trapped in a cycle of freezing and thawing. Each night the ground freezes
solid, but by day it grows soft and damp anew. Each man walks alone down his chosen row of a harvested corn field, stooping to run his bare hands along the splintery stubble, or to knock his boots together, clearing clumps of damp mud. When his boots have grown mud-heavy for the third time, the man stops walking and stands rooted in his row. Mud gathers on different boots at different rates, so the men are staggered across the field. They turn to face the woman, who waits at the entrance of the corn field, her apron pocket full of stones she has collected in the month leading to the big event.

The group may wait an hour, or if they’re lucky, only minutes, until a flock of geese glides overhead, calling each other through the crisp air. Their black bodies scatter and swoop, preparing to land in the field for a feast of forgotten kernels. The woman is ready: Madly, she flings her stones at the geese, for if she does not strike one with some force she may wither into spinsterhood. The geese will try to rise, flapping to lift their bodies, but they are slow. If a stone strikes a goose forcefully enough to daze it, or manages to bury itself in the goose’s breast, the bird will fall. The man nearest will pick it up and tuck it beneath his arm, triumphant. If it struggles he will snap its neck, or shoot it quickly in the head, so it will not suffer long. He carries the goose back to the party, where it is plucked and roasted. The ceremony ensues; the man and woman fuse their lives. Feasting and dancing last all night. The other men, those not chosen by the fallen goose, are moderately consoled by the flavors of sizzling goose flesh, roast pork, and buttery corn melting on their tongues.

At dawn the new couple departs, arm in arm, beneath a shower of goose feathers thrown by the guests.

The internet is an urban girl’s matchmaker. A woman enters her statistics onto a website or two. She uploads a photo of herself—head tilted downward, hair falling slightly into her eyes. The photo is lit none too well, with shadows on cheekbones, and one glint in her eye. She describes herself: “Fun-loving, laid-back gal. I love to
dance, cook, and take long walks. Healthy and energetic…”

She reads about men in her chosen age group. In their pictures they stand on mountaintops or white sand beaches, or sit on porches bathed in golden light. “Rugged and romantic.” “Never a dull moment.” “Easy-going Romeo.” Her heart doesn’t swoon.

Yet success has been had. E-mails are exchanged—the prospective couple discusses family background. Both sets of parents are divorced. He has three step-sisters. Her little brother died of sudden infant death syndrome at six months. They describe past adventures: She scubas. He once stripped for a bachelorette party (Yes, yes, he was rather drunk). They both want children. They are in the same income bracket. He owns a bungalow. She rents a townhome. Technicalities are eliminated without the messiness of face-to-face interaction.

They meet for dinner. Over chicken cacciatore the woman sees that the man is actually better looking than his picture indicated—slimmer, taller than she thought, his skin such an enticing shade of brown. Her eyes, he sees, are wide and honest. She wears very little make-up.

The next week he cooks her dinner at his place, takes her strolling through the neighborhood.

Love blooms electronically.

College: A Myth

Myths abound in husband choosing. Young women often fall for such hoaxes as “The College Myth.” You grow up, says this myth. You go to college. You meet the man you’ll marry. You graduate and honeymoon in Hawaii. He works as an engineer and you cook dinners. You work for a pittance at the non-euthanizing animal shelter until the first bundle of joy comes along. Sometimes it does happen this way. But oftentimes, it does not.

A young woman, eighteen years old, goes off to college. Her father says, “Study what you like, dear. The career will come along later. College is for learning to think.” So she studies Literature or Philosophy or the Russian language. She
eats ice cream with her girlfriends in the dormitory. She goes to parties and drinks beer and gains weight. At the recreation center she meets a young man—a geology student—and they are inseparable, for a year or two.

The woman goes home to spend Easter weekend with her family. At the farmer’s market, with a shiny eggplant in his hand, the geology student meets a woman with striking red hair who has traveled to New Zealand. She ran barefoot through the jungle with Maori warriors, hunting wild pig. His heart spins.

Two weeks later he leaves the well-rounded Russian language student crying under a streetlamp.

Divine Intervention

As in movies, fate brings them together. He is on his way to his sister’s house for a birthday dinner. He forgot to buy a gift. He waits in line behind a woman at the register and when she leaves, her wallet sits on the counter, forgotten. He picks it up, turns it in his palm. He fingers its gold clasp, examines her license photo, in which she looks ashen, but she is smiling broadly, with teeth. He calls her. He is a hero. The least she can give is her heart.

Suffocation

Visiting her parents at Christmastime, a woman walks up the stairs in the dark. Her parents are asleep, though it is not late. They sleep with their bedroom door open, now that they are old and she no longer lives with them. She hears her father breathing in his sleep, not a snore, but a whooosh, a little whistle on the exhale. In the hallway, the air is stuffy. For thirty-three years, her mother has slept beside her father, his whistling lilting through her dreams. The woman backs down the stairs and goes out walking with a cigarette, although she gave up smoking three weeks ago.
Resistance

Who needs a husband? He will require so much: affection, sex, silence, help choosing his wardrobe, his friends, his words. He is so much dead weight. Indeed, he is the tiller of soil, but this can be found elsewhere. He is all expectation and disappointment. One life is only so big. To make room for him—the multiplying, spreading, desirous, uninterested, ever-expanding bulk of him—a woman needs tremendous vacancy and tremendous excess. One woman can rarely spare both.

Sex

A woman is bound to grow bored with a husband. He cannot be her end-all be-all. Instead of a husband, she will seek a toy, and she will select him on a single criterion. Not his mind—ideas are fickle, both God and politics faltering under the fire of relativism. And a rich man grows so quickly stale, although if he is rich enough his money may provide diversion. Love, she decrees, will be about physical pleasure. She chooses a man who is swarthy and strong, tender and passionate, filthy and pure. The sight of him makes her sweat and tremble. If she is lucky, the passion will last a few years. If she is unlucky, never fear; she will find another—perhaps a woman, or a college boy.

Pregnancy

Also known as accident, carelessness, or fate, there are those who let biology choose their husband, and this is not always disastrous. This method is most successful for a responsible woman of deep character, unable to choose a husband for herself only because she takes this choice so seriously, so forever. She may have determined that, yes, she wants a husband, but she is paralyzed by choice, overwhelmed by possibility. She casts her burden to the wind. Together, they will raise their child.

You laugh, perhaps, or catch your breath. The juxtaposition of “responsible,” “deep character,” and “accident” are too much. Truly, this is a risky method for
husband-choosing; responsible women rarely use it. It is included in this document not as an endorsement, but only to acknowledge its existence.

*The Already-Spoken-For (A dead end)*

He carries himself with such grace. He is committed. His beloved, he says, is his anchor. But he touches the Single Woman on the shoulder once, maybe by accident. He pulls a bit of lint from her hair and she blushes. He finds this charming. But he is Unavailable. There is no danger here. He is in love. So they pursue conversations in a comfortable framework. There is nothing sexual going on. There is no tension. There is no doubt. He dotes upon his beloved—everyone knows how well their souls are matched. But what is this creeping flush, this occasional stammering when he speaks to the Single Woman?

*Withering*

Her hands are aging. She studies the veins, which seem to have swollen. The skin is brittle, finely wrinkled, like once-wet tissue paper. Pale brown spots have risen from some secret place below the surface. On the side of her index knuckle, between thumb and finger, is a smooth half-moon scar where, years ago, a jackknife entered her flesh, when she was whittling a canoe from a stick at summer camp. She remembers the scene: She did not wait to see the blood, but felt it fleck her face as she darted through trees to the nurse’s trailer. She didn’t need stitches, it turned out. It happened so long ago. How is this scar still with her?

Her fingernails are ragged and frayed, yellow when she doesn’t paint them. Sometimes, in earliest morning, she wakes and her heart nickers, as if full with marbles. She is alone in her wide bed in the dark. The husbands, they go to bright-eyed nymphs.

By daylight, at the hospital where she works, she remembers the waking moment with guilt. She doesn’t need a husband; she enjoys her life, she has good friends and independence. But in the bathroom mirror her hair looks brittle and dull.
A woman, Ella A., is walking her dog. She kneels to scoop its excrement into a blue plastic bag. Straightening, she finds herself face to face with a tall, narrow man. She recognizes him—from the laundromat, and from the library, where he works. It is mid-August, and hot. He is wearing shorts and his legs look strong, brown and thin. His name, which she has seen on his name badge at the library, is Henry, which she thinks is a little old fashioned. They talk about the library and the copy shop where she works. He tells her he has a sister, older by four years and married, who lives with her husband and her horse in Arizona.

Last week, Henry tells her, he drove through a valley in the southern part of the state on the way back from visiting his sister. He slept one night in the yard of a deserted church. When he woke in the morning, the bloody head of a cow was impaled on a fencepost near his tent. He tore his tent down, stuffing it in the car with the stakes dangling, some of the poles still fitted together, but before he drove away, before he got in the car himself, a man appeared.

"Sleep well?" the man asked. His hair, Henry noted, was in two solid clumps, like big dreadlocks. He wore tattered layers and his skin was thick and creased. He smelled of peppery sweat and patchouli. He put out his hand, "Cano," he said. "It's what they call me." Cano told Henry about the valley where the people grew hops for the brewery and about the weathered church where he lived with God. He slept in the choir loft. He pointed to its location on the second floor, above the entryway. Shiny hubcaps hung like ornaments from the windows. He grew potatoes around the base of the statue of the Virgin outside the front door. The cow head, Cano said, was for protection. He went on to explain, but his words blurred into Spanish.

All this Henry tells her standing in the street while her dog sniffs at his ankles and she clutches a stinking, blue plastic bag.

They ride bicycles together in the dark. Ella tells Henry what it was like when she was a kid, riding with the other kids in big, swooping arcs through the night. There were crickets and sprinkler puddles. There were potholes and, when they
were a little older, there was beer. At night, she says, it always feels like you’re riding so much faster. And so, when they reach the top of a tree covered hill, they ride fast down the other side. Her hair is in her mouth. He pulls ahead, but neither of them can see through the dappled shadows of leaves. There are roots and cracks and they grip their handlebars tightly. The road curves. They ride faster, laughing.

As it turns out, Henry takes out his anger on inanimate objects: phone books, garbage cans, drawers and cabinets and computer keyboards. He sleeps on both sides of the bed and he likes her pillow better than his own. He doesn’t like the telephone and doesn’t like interruptions when he is listening to music. He listens to music actively, and usually, he listens to Ella actively, with nods and questions. He likes his coffee strong and without sugar. He smells of sawdust and citrus. He makes delicious key lime pie. He folds his tee-shirts into perfect, smooth parcels, and stacks them in the drawer according to color. She learns many things beyond this. Some things are pleasant; others are not. Henry’s scale tips towards the pleasant side.

They make love with their socks on.

His house is very, very cold.

There is sand in his bed.

When Henry was growing up his father was distant and absent, always working, suing oil companies for irresponsible stewardship of the environment—a noble cause. Could a child complain? His mother doted and called him, he confides, her turnip.

Ella’s father had a quick temper. Her brother, older by two years, despised her when they were young and slammed doors on her fingers when he could. He hung her dolls from jump rope nooses, scarred their plastic by harnessing sun with a magnifying glass. Her sister was too young to get involved, a six year gap between them. Ella and her brother reached a truce in high school. He translated male language for her before she needed the translation. Boys didn’t notice her until college, and she didn’t really care.

Henry and Ella move in together—her place. She has a garden in the summer and working heat in winter. He brings his dishes: an unchipped, matching set.

They travel together, to Hungary, and dance in a circle with sawing fiddles
and stamping feet. The Hungarians sing words like winter wind through branches. Henry and Ella stomp and whirl along. Later, one dancer writes a translation on a scrap of paper and they learn that the song was about apples falling from a tree.

But as they travel his uncertainties bother her. Her timidity provokes him to slam drawers and telephones. They barter in the markets for tomatoes and carved wooden toys. She is better at it than him. He always arranges their lodging situations and she lets men speak only to him, which she would never stand for at home.

Home, they bore each other with complaints. Before bed he drinks bourbon to help him sleep. She rises late every morning, lying in bed awake, but motionless, staring out the window from her pillow.

She cannot walk away. She doesn’t even want to. So they spiral into oneness and she listens to him breathe in his sleep, and thinks of life without him, how quiet it would be, how deathly silent.