

Dear Uncle Mike,

I have a problem with my father. He doesn't seem to like any guy. Whenever I go out with my friends—guys and or girls—he gets upset. A lot of my friends are even afraid to come over to my house! He says it's a good thing that guys are afraid to come over. I've shown him that I can take care of myself, but he doesn't trust my friends (the guys). I've had a boyfriend for almost seven months, and my father doesn't really trust or like him. My mother likes him and trusts him, but my father thinks my boyfriend is going to try to do something wrong/bad to me. Do you have any advice for me and my father.

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous,

Uncle Mike has advice for everyone. That's why he's Uncle Mike. It's also why people often cross the street to avoid him. First, let's talk about why your father might feel the way he does. Young men (Uncle Mike loathes the term "teenager") have a reputation that is, in large part, richly deserved. Testosterone, the powerful hormone that drives much of their typical male behavior, tends to short circuit most notions of sexual ethics. For many long years, male humans are driven to distraction by their DNA's urge to replicate itself by whatever means necessary. The means necessary is, all too often, whatever female human is within reach. Having been a young male himself, your father isn't old enough to have forgotten the effects of testosterone poisoning. This only explains his feelings and in no way excuses his behavior which, judging from your letter, is flirting with full-blown neurosis.

You're a lucky young woman to have a boyfriend who respects your feelings. Please congratulate him for Uncle Mike. You should also thank your mother for having the good judgment not to confuse him with many of the young men she had to contend with when she was your age. Uncle Mike assumes she gets a word in edgewise now and then when she and your father are alone. You should tell her how much you appreciate her faith in both you and your friend. As for your father, there's probably precious little you can do, aside from doing nothing to reinforce his fears and hoping he'll take a long, hard look at the wedge he's driving between himself and his daughter. What people fear the most is the unknown. With luck, the more your father knows of your friends, and of you, the less overly protective he'll be. Have faith in his ability to change, work toward earning and holding his trust and believe things will eventually get better. Until they do, recognize that your father is behaving in a way he shouldn't because he loves you and doesn't want to see you hurt. As hard as it may be to see right now, he's doing the best he can dealing with a situation (raising a daughter) he's never dealt with before. If nothing else, be thankful that, unlike many too many parents, he cares.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Some friends were over last week and the conversation turned to marriage. Is it dead or dying? A relic of a male dominated culture? The glue that holds society together or the outdated response to survival conditions that no longer exist? Aside from child rearing, does it have a place in modern society? We'd be interested in hearing your thoughts.

Four Couples

Dear Group,

Does marriage have a place in modern society? Only if humans do. Any media traumatized, self centered primate with its mental/emotional baseball cap on backwards can fall in love. It takes a full-fledged human (or an average member of a "lesser" species) to pair bond for life. Uncle Mike has no idea what goes on between mated wolves and geese, but with humans, marriage involves a vow: an ancient term for which the word "promise" is a puny reflection. A vow is a pledge made, not just between two people, but between those people and whatever it is they perceive to be issues larger and more important than themselves. Vows are, to trot out another antiquated term, holy bonds, dissolved only by death. This is a tough gig to pitch in a world where "relationships" have a shelf life only slightly longer than disposable razors. The notion of keeping your word and rising to the challenge of building and maintaining a lifelong love between equals sounds pretty silly to those who've been taught that the next relationship is bound to be better, or at least different. Marriage presupposes faith, determination and the willingness to put someone else before yourself. To honor and cherish that person as if they were a messenger bearing gifts from the heart of all that is. Is marriage a relic of male domination? If this is a serious question, none of you has taken a good marriage. Male domination is the relic, marriage is its antimatter. There is, goodness knows, much to be said for the single life; but, when practiced overlong, it tends to breed the sort of hollow self indulgence to which malls, condominiums and hundred dollar sneakers were born to pander. Marriage is the art of complementarity; the affirmation that, while two can't eat as cheaply as one, the food will taste better and be more nourishing. Uncle Mike is a great fan of enduring domestic units whether children are involved or not. Men and women have much to learn from each other and nothing beats studying your life with someone who wants you to ace every test.

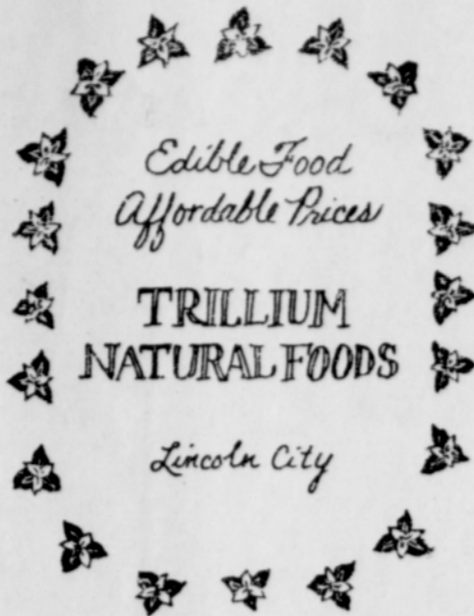
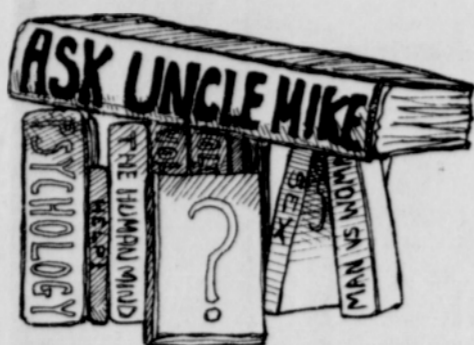
Dear Uncle Mike,

My girlfriend dresses like a slob. She's not filthy or anything but she never wears anything but jeans or sweat pants or dresses that don't have any shape. Then she wonders why I look at other women! I've tried buying her stuff but she doesn't wear it. Is there something I can do?

Mark

Dear Mark,

One of the nicest things about life is that there's always something you can do. Uncle Mike's first suggestion is that you find yourself a woman who dresses the way you want her to. Short of that, you should accept your friend for who and what she is. If she dresses with an exaggerated lack of fashion, she was probably dressing that way when you met her. If so, what's changed is you. It's a strange quirk in human mating that the traits that draw us together, the differences we find attractive and irresistible, often turn out to be the things that eventually grate on our nerves. They don't call it the human comedy for nothing, cupcake. Uncle Mike finds your part in it not all that amusing. That you can describe the person who, in the normal scheme of things, would be your closest friend as a "slob" makes Uncle Mike's mind reel with misgivings about the depth of your character. He also wonders about the sort of "stuff" you'd like to dress her in. (Have you thought of buying an inflatable doll?) He doesn't wonder at all, and neither should the poor woman who puts up with you, that you look at other women. Tell her for Uncle Mike that, when it comes to male cliches like yourself, it goes with the package.



Wine makes a man more pleased with himself; I do not say it makes him more pleasing to others. —Samuel Johnson, English author and lexicographer (1709-1784)



THE RARY PAGE



Topics have dwindled for me over the last 7 or 8 years, and this monthly scrawling has me scratching at the edges of the void. Perhaps it's time for retirement. I feel the pull of indolent Saturdays, lolling in the coffee shops, gophing around in my yard, chasing the cries of Caspian Terns in migration, gazing dandelion tufts into the distance, and generally just doggin' the cat.

So, Dear Reader, please excuse the paltriness of this piece, but I'm just tired and mentally dehydrated. Here's all I've got.

Blame it on fuddy-duddyism if you wish, but I'm saddened by the apparent passing of the personal letter in correspondence. Electronic mailing carries the day, supplanting those missives once carefully inked in cursive on a sheet of stationery. How sad, I would posit, for us all.

Think of those love letters in the sand, the purloined letter, Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son, the romantic letter duet between Elizabeth and Robert Browning, the mystique of letters found in a bottle on some far-flung shingle of beach, the Letters to Myself, the tear-stained letter, letters sealed with a kiss, "Dear John" letters, Amerigo Vespucci's letters from the New World, the sad mortuary in the post office where dead letters go.

Haphazardly boxed away, I've saved old letters. Some uneasiness forbade the burning. Certain I cherish: my letters from Vietnam, tender letters from Patti, 40 years of correspondence with my dear Australian friend Tony Knight, letters of congratulation and condolence.

Something beautiful happens, some marvelous recognition, when you receive a personal letter from one held dear. You recognize "the hand," the unique graphological qualities of the writing on the envelop, even before you open it. An individual close to you touched the very sheet you hold, pressed the enclosed violet petals, moistened the sealing mucilage, searched his heart, strove to pique the imagination.

Your Professor counsels you to write someone a real letter today. Compared to a real letter, e-mail is like an inter-office memo between two cans of Spam.



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Make the sage frolic, and the serious smile.
—Homer, Greek epic poet (9th century B.C.)

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—Charles Bukowski, American writer, *The Movie: Barfly*