

Dear Uncle Mike,

My boyfriend invited some of the people he works with to our apartment for cocktails. I'm a little new at this. The invitations say "from six to eight". My boyfriend says we don't have to feed them because it's not a dinner invitation. It seems to me they'll expect something to eat. Should I at least have some cheese and crackers? There's a rule for this somewhere, right?

New in Town

Dear New,

There's a rule for everything, dear; but, since the massive framework of etiquette (a French word meaning 'ritual fussiness') was bolted together by people Uncle Mike would never allow in his home, he can be of no help telling you which rule applies to your situation. In Uncle Mike's experience, much of it too grisly to go into, food of some sort is a good idea at 'affaires de cocktail', especially when you ask your guests to show up at suppertime. It makes no difference whether you're supposed to feed them or not. An evening of chitchat with people drinking on empty stomachs is an experience worth planning to prevent.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Does time really go faster when you're having fun?
Leah R.

Dear Leah,

Strictly speaking, and we must, time doesn't go anywhere. Like space, time is a conceptual backdrop for perceived change. Or, more correctly, space/time is the fabric of creation, the warp and woof of observable reality. This doesn't, of course, mean that time is constant and unchanging. Space/time is related to velocity. As one's speed increases, one's wrist watch (even if it's digital) slows down. At velocities approaching the speed of light, space/time disappears; and with it, you and your stupid clock. Does time go faster when you're having fun? This depends on what you mean by fun. Time goes fastest when you're sitting still. Unless you're watching championship bowling.

Dear Uncle Mike,

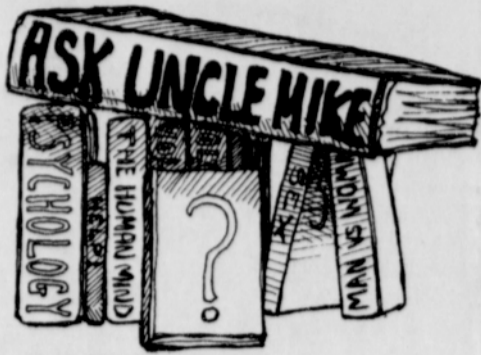
I'm writing about a friend of mine. 'Joe' started seeing a woman about two months ago and his life's going down the toilet. She's a nice person and all, but she was dating another guy when she met Joe and she's still dating him. My friend's in love and having her go out with someone else is driving him nuts. All he can think about is how to win this woman. I'm afraid he's going to bump into the two of them some night and punch the guy's lights out. On nights when she's out with "friends", Joe drives by her apartment to see if the lights are on and waits till she comes home to see who she's with. I'm worried about him. He doesn't listen to me and says I don't understand what real love is. If you were me, what would you do?
A Friend

Dear Friend,

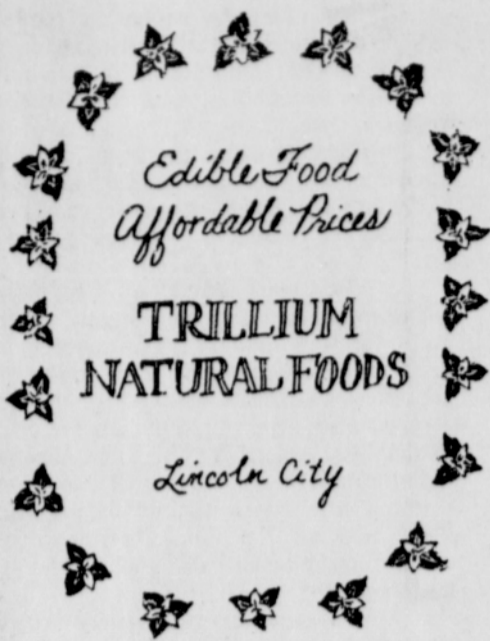
If Uncle Mike were you, and loosely speaking he has been, he'd pour himself a large mug of sour mash and ponder the idiot mysteries of human behavior. Your friend says you don't understand real love. Uncle Mike's not sure he does either, but he does have a pretty good handle on mental imbalance and obsession, which is the sort of love your friend is exhibiting to an outside observer. If and when he starts listening to reason again, tell him for Uncle Mike that he's coming unwrapped over a situation that is, strictly speaking, none of his business; and, depending on the young woman's game plan, possible beneath his contempt.

After looking and looking for many years, Uncle Mike has yet to witness anyone winning someone's love. Falling in love is the least rational of all human pastimes and, unless the love object is a card carrying whacko, he or she won't be keeping scoring on performance. We don't fall in love with winners, we fall in love with those it's impossible for us to resist. The young lady in question is doing what she wants to do. If she wanted to make a commitment to someone, she would. People are like that and your friend needs to recognize what is, and what's not.

Tell the nitwit that short circuiting will get him nowhere, unless the young lady is one of those who enjoy causing short circuits. In which case, he and everyone else should avoid her like the measles. Encourage him to back off a bit, emotionally disengage and lower the voltage. Offer to help by strapping him to a kitchen chair and giving him a soft towel to chew on. Explain that he's being a hopeless mope and needs to stiffen his spine. Tell him that with love, as with the rest of life, the only way to win is by deciding not to compete. And that driving by someone's apartment and parking there in the dead of night to see who the woman comes home with isn't just obsession: the authorities call it stalking.



Fairness is what justice really is.
- Justice Potter Stewart



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Dryads

By Nora Karena

It was a beautiful, blustery day last week when my roommate and I drove out to a friend's house in the hills to harvest moss for flower baskets.

In order to communicate the full significance of this event, I must explain that I am, as a former boyfriend frequently observed, a dryad. In this case, I am not referring to the feminine incarnation of a tree's spirit frolicking in the forest, but the archetype she represents. Most people know at least one dryad (if they are lucky!), and our fair village seems to abound with them. She is that sensual, slightly impractical earth-woman who will drag you two miles down a muddy trail because "You have got to see how the morning sun falls on a patch of trilliums under a budding vine maple." (And you had better appreciate it!)

This outing was custom made for dryads. The forest floor was littered with newly fallen leaves. Overhead alders, elders, willows and maples waved their shedding branches in the wind and on the hills around us, the giant spruces slowly swayed. The creek was beginning to swell from the rain. Dryads don't mind getting wet (it's actually kind of fun), and so clad in appropriate layers of flannel, wool, and leather, we eagerly embraced our task.

On the way to the alder grove, Steve enthusiastically showed us around his place. He told us about the elk, eagles and salmon, pointed out his favorite tree...a giant moss covered maple, and impressed us with his garden. He spoke about his plans for improvement. Here was a man who loves his land.

Our goal was to collect large, intact sheets of moss with which to line the afore-mentioned wire baskets. It took a little practice, but soon we had honed our techniques. My approach was to score a line down the trunk and then gently slip my fingers over the bark, caressing the tree as I lifted off the choking moss. I couldn't help but think of shearing sheep.

We developed a playful rivalry. "Look at this one!" Leslie would shout as she lifted a great fuzzy green pelt for us to admire.

Did I mention that dryads have very fertile imaginations? I was in heaven as I imagined myself to be tending the trees. Surely they enjoyed having their bark exposed to the cleansing rain. Perhaps they felt the same smooth clean feeling that I get after shaving my legs. Yes, the trees would certainly thank me.

I began to observe the life beneath the moss; beetles and bugs of every description. Leslie uncovered a beautiful salamander. Suddenly, I was filled with dread. Entire communities of insects were being displaced for our flower baskets! Maybe the trees were not so happy after all; maybe they would be angry that we had disturbed the delicate eco-system. Eco-warriors would surely protest in front our home if they knew! I could see the placards and hear the angry epithets. The shame!

But wait! The bugs burrow into the bark of the tree, and eat away at the vital inner layers of cambium. For the sake of the tree they must be stopped!

"Yes," I thought to myself, "but that is the grim reality of the food chain. Who am I to interfere?"

Being a dryad isn't always easy folks, and by the time we had filled our two Hefty Bags with booty, I was completely conflicted. My companions were unaware of my torment as they merrily headed back with their ill-gotten gain.

Then I remembered something I had left by the first tree so I set off to retrieve it. Alone in the woods, I became aware, once again of the beauty of the moment. The damp leaves at my feet. The colors...green, brown and gold...that seems to glow in the gray afternoon light. The smell of life and death mingled together as the trees seemed to dance to the rhythm of the wind. The forest was alive and I was simply a part of that life.

Many times I have wandered through the woods seeking the treasures that are found there. Moss, mushrooms, berries, herbs, and meat. Sometimes I go seeking only a little peace. Even if I return home empty handed, I am never unrewarded. The gift of the forest is Herself. Moments of silent ecstasy and awareness, when the soul forgets itself and becomes a part of something greater.

As I approached the house, my reverie was shattered by a stampede of puppies and my roommate's laughter. I sent out humble apologies to the creatures we disturbed and offered prayers of gratitude for the day, and for the moss.

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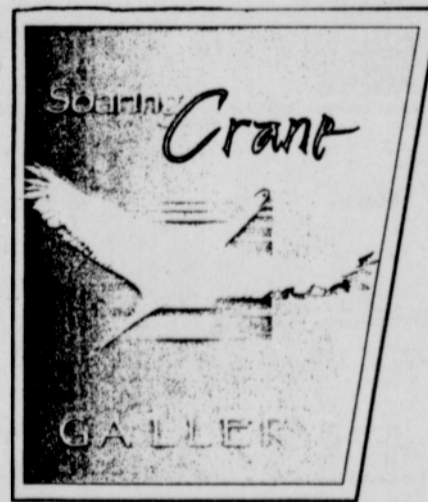
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- Joseph Joubert

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