

1 This Is Emo 0:01

No woman will ever satisfy me. I know that now, and I would never try to deny it. But this is actually okay, because I will never satisfy a woman, either.

Should I be writing such thoughts? Perhaps not. Perhaps it's a bad idea. I can definitely foresee a scenario where that first paragraph could come back to haunt me, especially if I somehow became marginally famous. If I become marginally famous, I will undoubtedly be interviewed by someone in the media,¹ and the interviewer will inevitably ask, "Fifteen years ago, you wrote that no woman could ever satisfy you. Now that you've been married for almost five years, are those words still true?" And I will have to say, "Oh, God no. Those were the words of an entirely different person—a person whom I can't even relate to anymore. Honestly, I can't image an existence without _____. She satisfies me in ways that I never even considered. She saved my life, really."

Now, I will be lying. I won't really feel that way. But I'll certainly say those words, and I'll deliver them with the utmost sincerity, even though those sentiments will not be there. So then the interviewer will undoubtedly quote lines from *this particular paragraph*, thereby reminding me that I swore I would publicly deny my true feelings, and I'll chuckle and say, "Come on, Mr. Rose. That was a literary device. You know I never really believed that."

But here's the thing: I do believe that. It's the truth now, and it will be in the future. And while I'm not exactly happy about that truth, it doesn't make me sad, either. I know it's not my fault. It's no one's fault, really. Or maybe it's everyone's fault. It

1: Hopefully Charlie Rose, if he's still alive.

should be everyone's fault, because it's everyone's problem. Well, okay... not everyone. Not boring people, and not the Americans, I notice that they all seem to share a single unifying characteristic: the inability to experience the kind of mind-blowing, transcendent romantic relationship they perceive to be a normal part of living. And someone needs to take the fall for this. So instead of blaming no one for this (which is kind of cowardly) or blaming everyone (which is kind of meaningless), I'm going to blame John Cusack.

I once loved a girl who almost loved me, but not as much as she loved John Cusack. Under certain circumstances, this would have been fine; Cusack is relatively good-looking; he seems like a pretty cool guy (he likes the Clash and the Who, at least), and he undoubtedly has millions of bones in the bank. If Cusack and I were competing for the same woman, I could easily accept losing. However, I don't really feel like John and I were "competing" for the girl I'm referring to, inasmuch as her relationship to Cusack was confined to watching him as a two-dimensional projection, pretending to be characters who don't actually exist. Now there was a time when I would have thought that detachment would have given me a huge advantage over Johnny C., inasmuch as my relationship with this woman included things like "talking on the phone" and "nuzzling under umbrellas" and "eating pancakes." However, I have come to realize that I perceived this competition completely backward; it was definitely an unfair battle, but not in my favor. It was unfair in Cusack's favor. I never had a chance.

It appears that countless women born between the years of 1965 and 1978 are in love with John Cusack. I cannot fathom how he isn't the number-one box-office star in America, because every straight girl I know would sell her soul to share a milkshake with that [redacted]. For upwardly mobile women in their twenties and thirties, John Cusack is the neo-Elvis. But here's what none of these upwardly mobile women seem to realize: They don't love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When

they see Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charmingly loquacious teenager he played in *Say Anything*, a movie that came out more than a decade ago. That's the guy they think he is, when Cusack played Eddie Thomas in *America's Sweethearts* or the sensitive hit man in *Crosse Pointe Blank*, all his female fans knew he was only acting... but they assume when the camera stopped rolling, he went back to his genuine self... which was someone like Lloyd Dobler... which was, in fact, someone who is Lloyd Dobler, and someone who continues to have a storybook romance with Diane Court (or with Lone Slye, depending on how you look at it). And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this—not necessarily about *Say Anything*, but about any fictionalized portrayals of romance that happen to hit us in the right place, at the right time. This is why I will never be completely satisfied by a woman, and this is why the kind of woman I tend to find attractive will never be satisfied by me. We will both measure our relationship against the prospect of fake love.

Fake love is a very powerful thing. That girl who adored John Cusack once had the opportunity to spend a weekend with me in New York at the Waldorf-Astoria, but she elected to fly to Portland instead to see the first U.S. appearance by Coldplay, a British pop group whose success derives from their ability to write melodic alt-rock songs about fake love. It does not matter that Coldplay is absolutely the [redacted] band I've ever heard in my entire [redacted] life, or that they sound like a mediocre photocopy of Travis (who sound like a mediocre photocopy of Radiohead), or that their greatest [redacted] artistic achievement is a video where their blandly attractive frontman walks on a beach on a cloudy [redacted] afternoon. None of that matters. What matters is that Coldplay manufactures fake love as frenetically as the Ford [redacted] Motor Company manufactures Mustangs, and that's all this woman heard. "For you I bleed myself dry," sang their block-head vocalist, brilliantly informing us that stars in the sky are, in fact, yellow. How am I going to compete with that [redacted]? That

sleepy-eyed bozo isn't even making sense. He's just pouring fabricated emotions over four gloomy guitar chords, and it ends up sounding like love. And what does that mean? It means she flies to Portland to hear two hours of amateurish U.K. hyper-slop, and I sleep alone in a \$270 hotel in Manhattan, and I hope Goldplay gets [REDACTED] dropped by [REDACTED] EMI and ends up like the Stone Roses, who were actually a better [REDACTED] band, all things considered.

Not that I'm bitter about this. Oh, I concede that I may be taking this particular example somewhat personally—but I do think it's a perfect illustration of why almost everyone I know is either overtly or covertly unhappy. Goldplay songs deliver an amorphous, ineluctable interpretation of how being in love is supposed to feel, and people find themselves wanting that feeling for real. They want men to adore them like Lloyd Dobler would, and they want women to think like Aimee Mann, and they expect all their arguments to sound like Sam Malone and Diane Chambers. They think everything will work out perfectly in the end (just like it did for Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones and Nick Hornby's Rob Fleming), and they don't stop believing, because Journey's Steve Perry insists we should never do that. In the nineteenth century, teenagers merely aspired to have a marriage that would be better than that of their parents; personally, I would never be satisfied unless my marriage was as good as Cliff and Clair Huxtable's (or at least as enigmatic as Jack and Meg White's).

Pundits are always blaming TV for making people stupid, movies for desensitizing the world to violence, and rock music for making kids take drugs and kill themselves. These things should be the least of our worries. The main problem with mass media is that it makes it impossible to fall in love with any acumen of normalcy. There is no "normal," because everybody is being twisted by the same sources simultaneously. You can't compare your relationship with the playful couple who lives next door, because they're probably modeling themselves after Chandler Bing and Monica Geller. Real people are actively trying to live like

fake people, so real people are no less fake. Every comparison becomes impractical. This is why the impractical has become totally acceptable; impracticality almost seems cool. The best relationship I ever had was with a journalist who was as crazy as me, and some of our coworkers liked to compare us to Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. At the time, I used to think, "Yeah, that's completely valid: We fight all the time, our love is self-destructive, and—if she was mysteriously killed—I'm sure I'd be wrongly arrested for second-degree murder before dying from an overdose." We even watched Sid & Nancy in her parents' basement and giggled the whole time. "That's us," we said gleefully. And like I said—this was the best relationship I ever had. And I suspect it was the best one she ever had, too.

Of course, this media transference is not all bad. It has certainly worked to my advantage, just as it has for all modern men who look and talk and act like me. We all owe our lives to Woody Allen. If Woody Allen had never been born, I'm sure I would be doomed to a life of celibacy. Remember the aforementioned woman who loved Cusack and Goldplay? There is absolutely no way I could have dated this person if Woody Allen didn't exist. In tangible terms, she was light-years out of my league, along with most of the other women I've slept with. But Woody Allen changed everything. Woody Allen made it acceptable for beautiful women to sleep with nerdy, bespectacled goofballs; all we need to do is fabricate the illusion of intellectual humor, and we somehow have a chance. The irony is that many of the women most susceptible to this scam haven't even seen any of Woody's movies, nor would they want to touch the actual Woody Allen if they ever had the chance [REDACTED]. If asked, most of these foxy ladies wouldn't classify Woody Allen as sexy, or handsome, or even likable. But this is how media devolution works: It creates an archetype that eventually dwarfs its origin. By now, the "Woody Allen Personality Type" has far greater cultural importance than the man himself.

Now, the argument could be made that all this is good for the sexual bloodstream of Americana, and that all these Women Who Want Woody are being unconsciously conditioned to be less shallow than their sociology dictates. Self-deprecating cleverness has become a virtue. At least on the surface, movies and television actively promote dating the nonbeautiful. If we have learned anything from the mass media, it's that the only people who can make us happy are those who don't strike us as being particularly desirable. Whether it's *Jerry Maguire* or *Sixteen Candles* or *Who's the Boss* or *Some Kind of Wonderful* or *Speed Racer*, we are constantly reminded that the unattainable icons of perfection we just after can never fulfill us like the platonic allies who have been there all along.² If we all took media messages at their absolute face value, we'd all be sleeping with our best friends. And that does happen, sometimes.³ But herein lies the trap. We've also been trained to think this will *always* work out over the long term, which dooms us to disappointment. Because when push comes to shove, we really *don't* want to have sex with our friends . . . unless they're sexy. And sometimes we *do* want to have sex with our blackhearted, soul-sucking enemies . . . assuming they're sexy. Because that's all it ever comes down to in real life, regardless of what happened to Michael J. Fox in *Teen Wolf*.

The mass media causes sexual misdirection: It prompts us to need something deeper than what we want. This is why Woody Allen has made nebbyish guys cool; he makes people assume there is something profound about having a relationship based on witty conversation and intellectual discourse. There isn't. It's just another gimmick, and it's no different than wanting to be with someone because they're thin or rich or the former lead singer of Whiskeytown. And it actually might be worse, because an intel-

2. The notable exceptions being *Vertigo* (where the softhearted Barbara Bel Geddes gets jammed by sexpot Kim Novak) and *My So-Called Life* (where poor Brian Krakow never got any play, even though Jordan Catalano couldn't be read).

3. "Sometimes" meaning "during college."

lectual relationship isn't real at all. My witty banter and cerebral discourse is always completely contrived. Right now, I have three and a half dates worth of material, all of which I pretend to deliver spontaneously.⁴ This is my strategy: If I can just coerce women into the last half of that fourth date, it's anyone's ball game. I've beaten the system; I've broken the code; I've slain the Minotaur. If we part ways on that fourth evening without some kind of conversational disaster, she probably digs me. Or at least she *thinks* she digs me, because who she digs is not really me. Sadly, our relationship will not last ninety-three minutes (like *Arnie Hall*) or ninety-six minutes (like *Manhattan*). It will go on for days or weeks or months or years, and I've already used everything in my vault. Very soon, I will have nothing more to say, and we will be sitting across from each other at breakfast, completely devoid of banter; she will feel betrayed and foolish, and I will suddenly find myself actively trying to avoid spending time with a woman I didn't deserve to be with in the first place.

Perhaps this sounds depressing. That is not my intention. This is all normal. There's not a lot to say during breakfast. I mean, you just woke up, you know? Nothing has happened. If neither person had an especially weird dream and nobody burned the toast, breakfast is just the time for chewing Cocoa Puffs and/or wishing you were still asleep. But we've been convinced not to think like that. Silence is only supposed to happen as a manifestation of supreme actualization, where both parties are so at

4. Here's one example I tend to deploy on second dates, and it's rewarded with an endearing guffaw at least 90 percent of the time: I ask the woman what religion she is. Inevitably, she will say something like, "Oh, I'm sort of Catholic, but I'm pretty lapsed in my participation," or "Oh, I'm kind of Jewish, but I don't really practice anymore." Virtually everyone under the age of thirty will answer that question in this manner. I then respond by saying, "Yeah, it seems like everybody I meet describes themselves as 'sort of Catholic' or 'sort of Jewish' or 'sort of Methodist.' Do you think all religions have this problem? I mean, do you think there are twenty-five-year-old Amish people who say, 'Well, I'm sort of Amish. I currently work as a computer programmer, but I still believe pants with metal zippers are the work of Satan.'"