



Last week, my wife got together with a longtime mutual friend, and in the course of a long, “girl-talk” dinner, they wound up reminiscing about their romantic histories and the thrill of the chase. Or, more precisely, the thrill of the chased—of being the pursued and (only sometimes) pursuing.

They both have been in the same committed relationships for at least a decade, and now have children and careers to boot. And for them, now may be a good time to look back fondly on old relationships, near-misses, and everyone in between.

When my wife came home and told me about it, I felt they were like those World War II veterans who tend to forget just how hellish D-Day was. The trouble with distance in time is that it tends to bathe everything in a uniformly golden glow, where every spoken line sounds cinematic and every strand in the plot winds up neatly arranged by the final fade. But in fact, love is frequently a bloody business, and more often than not, the thrill of the chase becomes the anguish of the unrequited. And the thrill of the chased becomes the boredom of the unrequiting.

The husband of my wife’s friend is also a mutual friend, and we, the male side of this foursome, tend to look at romantic reminiscing with the same jaundiced eye. Not that there weren’t good moments to remember, but because we simply don’t get the same emotional lift that our wives do in remembering. We tend to look at our romantic histories in the same way we look at measles—as something good to go through, but only once.

Of course, even for men like us, there is still a shiver of remembrance when you think of a girl whose scent made you dizzy. But on the whole, my romantic history was one part of my life—complicated, exhilarating and dramatic as it was—that I have no wish to live over again. It’s not an accident that in all of literature, one of the most persistent metaphors for falling in love is a disease. As Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote in his novel

on love lost and rediscovered, the symptoms of the disastrous love that strikes his protagonist Florentine Ariza are indistinguishable from those of cholera.

Women, on the other hand, seem by and large to relish the reminiscing about relationships far more. For many men—particularly those like me with social skills that are below sea level—our romantic histories are nothing but an occasion to recall what Rilke wrote in the first of the *Duino Elegies*: “Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror.”

Granted, Rilke meant that line in a very different, and much more mystical sense, but it works in this other context as well. The Rilke line’s appropriateness should be clear to anyone who underwent the knuckle-chewing anxiety of screwing up one’s courage to call up a girl to ask her out—and then panicking and slamming down the phone the second she answers.

Of course, not every male is as dismissive as I am of the thrill of the chase. I have friends who have not lost their taste for the chase even ten or twenty years after getting married. And so they’re still out there in the trenches firing away, and occasionally they come over to tell me about their latest exploits. For them, there would have to be a counter-aphorism: “Marriage is nothing but the beginning of trouble.*

If the chase is simply a game, something that is not played for real stakes, then I suppose this aphorism makes for some kind of sense. But if a man is playing for keeps, then all this extracurricular screwing around seems to me like a terrific waste of energy.

If a man is playing for keeps, the good news is: you have to get it right only once. But the bad news is: getting it right usually entails getting it wrong many more times than is good for your ego.

My wife and her friend also pointed out that for women, this kind of reminiscing about romantic histories has more value as one gets older. Her friend contended that a man like her husband has the luxury of seeing his “market value” rise as he gets older. A woman who has been married 15 years is rarely in that position, unless she is one of those rare indestructible types like Isabella Rossellini or Iman. And so for a woman, there is a special sweetness to remembering the peak of one’s babehood.

On the other hand, for men, the dynamics of what might be termed “romantic market value” do tend to run in the other direction. As an old friend of mine once said: “Basically, back in college, you and I just couldn’t get arrested, romantically speaking. *Nada*. And, now that I

have three kids and am no longer in the running, is when all these young women suddenly start coming on to me.”

It's not as if my friend has suddenly started to look like Jude Law or George Clooney in his mid-thirties; far from it. It has more to do with intangibles; he is simply more confident, more capable, more relaxed. Being more relaxed has a lot to do with it, I suspect. Just as you can't shoot a free throw if you try too hard, striking up a good conversation with a pretty woman relies a great deal on not over-thinking the entire process—the way we used to when we were 17.

My friend's being relaxed, in turn, stems in large part from being married—from being off the market and out of the race. He has nothing to prove and nothing to chase. He said: “By the time I was more or less confident that I would stand a reasonably good chance with the kind of woman I would be attracted to, I was married. Ain't that a shame?”

This is what I would call the phenomenon of ironic obsolescence: the minute it's perfected, it's obsolete. It happens to aircraft carriers and propeller-driven planes, but it applies to courting skills, too. And to those of us for whom courting skills are a hard-won commodity—as opposed to those young men born with charm pouring out of their ears—this kind of obsolescence has a bite all its own. It is one more proof that youth is wasted on the young and that God has a sense of humor. ☺