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My proposal worked as planned

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—As my 30th wedding anniversary looms sometime next week, I've been thinking about how we start a process in which half of those who engage in it fail.

The roots of divorce might be found in how we propose marriage. I offer my own success as an alternative.

The conventional start to all conventional marriages is The Conventional Proposal.

Everyone should understand several things about conventions.

First, what happens there, doesn't stay there. This is an excellent reason to avoid conventions.

Second, no textbook exists to instruct the ignorant and inexperienced -- here, I'm talking personally -- about how to propose marriage. In the absence of graduate coursework or a personal trainer, our only model is reality television

Third, one of the possible twosome has to be brave enough to pop the question. This burden usually and quite unfairly falls on the boy who has to screw up the courage to make the first call, ask for a dance and propose a marital future.

As a college junior, I asked a freshman out for Saturday night. She turned me down, saying that she had to study...*"to get ahead."* While a good 90 percent of Oberlin College students studied on Saturday nights until 12, none had ever thought to use this particular excuse to avoid dating, a primitive practice we were required to study in anthropology. Maybe she figured that rejection would increase my interest; it did.

I oppose asking any question whose answer I do not know in advance. This is one reason why I've not asked anyone to marry me since I was married 30 years ago.

Finally, there's no guarantee that the one pitching The Proposal is throwing to one who will choose to receive it. Wouldn't it be better if the pitcher knew in advance that his offer would be accepted? Isn't that called risk-management? Isn't risk-management why people fix horse races?

When my second time came around, I visited a long-forgotten part of my brain where I'd stored a conventional image of how to do The Proposal.

This involved getting down on one knee and saying something really stupid like “Will you marry me?”

An approach as aggressive as this could be easily misconstrued as a tawdry effort to look up her dress.

I wanted a guarantee, a sure thing. I wanted to put in the fix. So I threw out the conventional Proposal.

Here is my alternative.

My first act was to dump the subject-object out of our canoe and into the Potomac River at a place called Smoke Hole on a crisp Saturday morning in April.

Reason: Marriage is one of those life deals where you just have to jump in the water and see whether you swim or drown. Some of us even drown more than once, which does not seem to occur with other mammals. I figured it was best to see whether our possible future union would sink or float in a literal sense.

Rolling the canoe, in other words, was a crafty component of my alternative proposal rather than clumsy ineptitude—which is another part of my alternative. Dumping girls out of canoes was always a well-known part of my courting repertoire—at least, it was known by me. I was hoping that she would not think I was communicating my intentions symbolically.

Note the careful staging that framed my first act.

By “crisp morning,” I mean temperature in the low teens in the sunshine, of which there was none visible at 6 a.m. By crisp, I mean a humble breeze that might be described as gale force. By crisp, I mean life-threatening.

After we righted the canoe, I was presented with a public-service announcement. “I am cold and wet,” she said.

“It’s only another 20 miles to the take out,” I said, ever helpfully.

“I am COLD, and I am WET.”

This conversation was conducted while standing in snow-fed waters up to our waists.

“Is that an ice floe?” she asked, pointing to a house-size, white object moving toward us.

“Of course, not,” I assured her. “It’s a Styrofoam stage prop from a recent elementary school pageant, ‘Our Good Friends, The Penguins.’”

“What is it that you don’t understand about my statement that I am **COLD and WET?**”

No one can accuse me of not *listening* when cold, wet women who I am pursuing make this fact known to me.

“Oh,” I said, “Maybe you would prefer being warm and dry?”

I offered this as theoretical question. I didn't want to impose a specific solution to the immediate problem of being cold and wet, which I would have solved with a towel and the suggestion that her wet shirt would dry faster were it removed.

"I am getting COLDER."

"But not wetter," I said, ever helpfully. "You can't get wetter than 100 percent wet. Anyway, your torso is drying by evaporation."

"I do not want my torso to dry by evaporation."

"Oh," I said. Clearly, she was not into experimental physics. I concentrated on the other attributes that wetness brought out.

It began to drizzle, no more than a mist by any objective measure. It was, however, getting increasingly hard to see her through the egg-size drops of mist that were hitting us as she stood shivering dramatically.

"Let's go back to the tent," I said ever helpfully.

"And then what?"

"Then we crawl into our soaked sleeping bags. Watch rain water saturate the no-longer impermeable fabric and drip on our foreheads. We can play 20 Questions."

When she grabbed a paddle like Babe Ruth and began swinging it toward my baseball, I knew my alternative plan was working.

"How about I show you the prettiest county in the East?" I asked.

"Is it warm and dry?"

"I promise that it will be warmer and drier than where you are at this moment."

"Deal," she said.

I was rolling.

We bagged the canoe...and the tent...and the outside. I drove us to Highland County, Virginia. We stayed the night...under a roof not made of impermeable fabric.

The next day we drove around. "That's a place I'd buy," I said, nodding toward a two-story farmhouse north of Blue Grass, "if it's for sale."

"Is it warm and dry?" she asked. It's good, I thought, that she had a keen interest in local environmental conditions.

The place *was* for sale, though not listed publicly. We came out a few weeks later for a look-around. Snow was blowing. Wind was howling. More Styrofoam stage props floated in the pond next to the house.

"It's just a freak squall," I said. "Lots of places in Virginia have snow in mid-February."

"It's M-A-Y," she said. "Mid-MAY."

“Of course,” I said, “An honest error on my part. When I looked at my calendar this morning, I must have mistaken the photograph of a May surfboard for a toboggan. I admit I was baffled as to why the tobogganers were wearing bikinis rather than galoshes.”

She said something that some might have construed as “Help.”

We went inside where the sellers were feeding their furniture into a woodstove to keep warm and dry.

I liked what I saw.

On the way back to Washington, we were driving east down Bullpasture Mountain on Rt. 250, which was sometimes thought to be a functional two-lane, public road maintained by the Commonwealth of Virginia. We were in the section that featured two barrel rolls and more pants-watering turns than a rollercoaster.

“Did you like that farm?” I asked.

“It was very nice...from what I was able to see when the snow stopped. The fields were very...white.”

“The living room was warm,” I said.

“It was the only room with heat.”

“But all the rooms were dry,” I said.

“Yes, she said,” “all the rooms were dry, except for the back walk-in closet where I found the bucket with water in it.”

“A closet is not technically a room,” I said. “So?”

“So,” she said.

“So?”

[Note my skill in not popping the question.]

“So,” she said. “I think you should buy it.”

“So,” I said, “I don’t want to move out here by myself.”

[Not many guys have the genius to frame The Proposal as a negative declarative sentence.]

She looked at me. Then, recognition flashed.

“PULL OVER. I’M GOING TO BE SICK!”

A simple “No thanks.” would have worked for me. At least she didn’t say that she had to study to get ahead.

It’s not like she was inexperienced with fielding marriage proposals, conventional though they were. One serious suitor had given her a hugely expensive watch for Christmas to grease the skids of his Proposal. She gave him a cheese knife. He interpreted the exchange correctly.

She spent 20 minutes doubled over and moaning. It was touch and go on the upchuck front, and then we went.

Maybe, I thought, I would have done better on one knee. No, I said, I have faith in my alternative.

We drove home without an answer.

I was confident. I was not expecting a cheese knife in the mail.

She called in sick on Monday and Tuesday. Aching head. Cramping feet. Churning belly. Burning thigh.

On Tuesday night, she called me from her apartment. "I have to get back to work. I'm tired of being sick."

"Are you warm and dry?"

"Yes, I am warm and dry."

"Good," I said. I figured my odds improved to the extent that she was associating me with the abnormal meteorological conditions she craved.

"I'm tired of being sick," she repeated, "so the answer is...yes."

At the time, I admit that I did not catch the connective logic between the first part of that sentence and the second, and still don't. But the time for applying logic had passed.

My alternative proposal had succeeded.

"Good," I said. I didn't want to overwhelm her with praise, lest it lead to greater lucidity and a motion to reconsider. Any motion, of course, could trigger another emergency stop.

We were married a few months later in a spot noted for its warmth and dryness, a spot far from the phantom penguins of the Potomac.

The bride insisted that "obedience to her husband" be stricken from the ceremony. Apparently, she had seen enough of my leadership skills as captain of our canoe.

I asked for a cutting board in advance of any future cheese knife.

And now, 30 years later, we will celebrate our pre-nuptial dunking and subsequent ceremony [where the groom was forced into a standing-smiling position for 28 straight hours while every Tom, Dick and Harry in Charlotte was photographed with him in more combinations than Yale has locks] by...being warm and dry.

The secret to setting up a winning Proposal is...a guy who knows how to handle a canoe. Adversity creates opportunity.

The secret to getting a Yes is...a guy who knows the value of keeping a Keeper warm and dry.

I knew that if she said Yes under the circumstances I had so carefully orchestrated, the marriage would last.

Happy Anniversary, Pup.

