

Praise for *How to Be Married* (to Melissa)

“Dustin Nickerson is a lot like me. Young, handsome, a former youth pastor from the Pacific Northwest, a comedian, and married to a woman out of his league named Melissa. The only difference between us is I’m Black, and he loves flannels. His book is a great guide on how to be married with his signature comedic touch. He’s one of the funniest comedians I know and a dear friend. Like me, his marriage and family come before success. This book is going to make you laugh, think, and be a better partner. I can’t wait for you to read it and I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.”

—KEVONSTAGE, COMEDIAN, PODCASTER, AND PRODUCER

“Marriage sure is a puzzle. It’s so hard and there are so many ups and downs, twists and turns as life kicks you in the teeth. It’s also joyful and wonderful! Dustin, with darling Melissa, gives us a front-row peek into their very normal, hilarious, wait-are-they-spying-on-me-and-my-husband-relationship. It’s insightful, helpful, and entertaining and as a comedian, I gotta have fun while I’m learning.”

—LEANNE MORGAN, COMEDIAN

“I learned two important things in this book: the argument is almost never about what you’re arguing over, and Dustin is as hilarious on the page as he is on the mic. Dustin and Melissa share their marriage and arguments with such vulnerability that I felt like a nosey neighbor, listening in and then turning to my husband saying, “Thank God we don’t fight like that,” right before we begin an argument about how we do in fact fight like that. I felt seen to say the least. If you want some relationship advice and to laugh a lot, this book is for you.”

—ANJELAH JOHNSON-REYES, ACTRESS,
COMEDIAN, PODCASTER, AND AUTHOR

“*How to Be Married (to Melissa)* feels like you’re having a conversation with a guy who has legitimate experience and expertise in my favorite things: faith, marriage, and comedy. In a culture full of ‘fake it till you make it’ people, Dustin is the real deal when it comes to all three categories.”

—TREY KENNEDY, COMEDIAN

How to Be Married

(to Melissa)

***A Hilarious Guide to a Happier,
One-of-a-Kind Marriage***

Dustin Nickerson



NELSON
BOOKS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

How to Be Married (to Melissa)

© 2022 by Dustin Nickerson

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Nelson Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Any internet addresses, phone numbers, or company or product information printed in this book are offered as a resource and are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the existence, content, or services of these sites, phone numbers, companies, or products beyond the life of this book.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nickerson, Dustin, 1984- author.

Title: How to be married (to Melissa): a hilarious guide to a happier, one-of-a-kind marriage / Dustin Nickerson.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, [2022] | Summary: "Popular standup comedian and podcaster Dustin Nickerson delivers a hilarious and practical take on navigating marriage based on his everyday experiences as a husband, father, and an Average Joe who is still trying to figure it all out"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022003379 (print) | LCCN 2022003380 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400231614 (hc) | ISBN 9781400231621 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Marriage--Humor. | Christian life--Humor. | Marriage--Religious aspects--Christianity--Humor.

Classification: LCC PN6231.M3 N53 2022 (print) | LCC PN6231.M3 (ebook) | DDC 306.8102/07--dc23/eng/20220304

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003379>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003380>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To, who else, Melissa Nickerson:
my moonlight, CFO, and RBA.*



Contents

<i>Foreword by Taylor Tomlinson</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: Naked and Afraid</i>	xi
Chapter 1: If You Like <i>Fight Club</i>, You'll Love Marriage	1
Chapter 2: A Full Heart Won't Fill an Empty Bank Account	17
Chapter 3: I'd Like to Order a Happy Marriage. But Hold the In-Laws.	39
Chapter 4: Great Sexpectations	55
Chapter 5: The World's Shortest Advice on Cheating	69
Chapter 6: Marriage Is About Balance, but Sometimes It Gives You Vertigo	71
Chapter 7: Our "Footprints in the Sand" Are on Different Beaches	89
Chapter 8: We're Both Fat, but Only One of Us Is Pregnant	109
Chapter 9: The Baby Is Two Days Old. Is It Time to Schedule the Vasectomy?	131
Chapter 10: Kids Are Always at "the Hardest Age"	149
Chapter 11: Love the One(s) You're With	169
	vii

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	189
<i>About the Author</i>	191

Foreword

I have known Dustin Nickerson for roughly a decade now. He is one of the kindest, funniest, most hardworking people that I know. He makes me feel lazy and incomplete as a human being in the best possible way. But the most valuable friendships are the ones that make you desperately want to be a better person and Dustin is absolutely that friend for me. Most importantly, though, over these last ten years Dustin has singlehandedly renewed my faith in men. He likes to joke that nobody hits on him after shows. This is wildly untrue. I have seen it happen many times and it used to make me very upset. I'd think, *How can these women attempt to corrupt a man who talks so often about his wife and children onstage?! If you want a comedian willing to cheat, it's not that hard to find, ladies! Leave my happily married friend alone!*

It took me a few years but now I understand why. Women want to be with someone like Dustin Nickerson. Someone who is both a wonderful husband and exceptional father. Someone who will get onstage every single night and tell thousands of people how amazing his wife is. Dustin has told me many times that if Melissa were ever to die, he would “just become Robin Williams’ character in *Good Will Hunting*.”

He and I have spent a lot of time traveling together—countless

FOREWORD

early morning flights and long car rides—and I am always so grateful to be on the road with someone who not only is faithful and loyal to his partner but talks about her in such a consistently lovely way. (Some of my favorite Melissa compliments are “endlessly interesting” and “strikingly beautiful.”)

Stand-up comedians are generally very narcissistic. Sacrifice is not something that comes to us naturally. But Dustin’s marriage and family always come before his career, before his own comfort, before his own ego. His priorities are never out of order. I have watched him take the first flight out Sunday morning after Saturday night late shows—often on three or four hours of sleep—to make it home in time for a baseball game or just trampoline time. It is hard to say who I am most jealous of in the Nickerson family—Dustin for being married to Melissa, or their children for being lucky enough to grow up with Dustin and Melissa as parents.

This book will resonate with so many people, but it will also probably make you a little angry because who actually meets their soulmate in high school? Couples that have only ever been with each other are few and far between, but even with his rare, impossibly romantic story, Dustin manages to be blunt, realistic, and hilariously honest about how much work it takes to have a successful relationship. He and Melissa did not just get lucky and stumble into a happy marriage, they have worked hard to build one together. As someone who has gone to Dustin many times for advice about love and life, I am excited that others will be able to benefit from the wisdom I have personally received from him by reading this book.

(PS In the interest of total transparency, I have not read the sex portion of Dustin’s book because he is basically my big brother and—*ew*. But I’m sure that chapter is great too.)

—Taylor Tomlinson

Introduction

Naked and Afraid

Not one time in my life have I read the intro to a book, so honestly, I'm impressed you're here. I don't like that pages haven't started counting yet. Roman numerals? Little *iii*'s? What's that about? You mean I'm reading but it doesn't count toward my total? I'm out. I know a scam when I see one.

With that in mind, I'll try to make this a good intro.

I got married at the tender age of nineteen, which tells you right off the bat that I've made some questionable decisions. Melissa was twenty at the time and chose to marry *me*, which shows she might have even worse judgment. Yes, we got married before we could drink (legally, that is—thanks again for the bottle of champagne, Aunt Darlene).

Like any marriage, my relationship with Melissa hasn't always been a picnic. (Though there have been fights over food, plenty of bugs, and someone not getting enough blanket, so maybe it has been a picnic, actually.) But over the last twenty years, we have figured out how *not* to get divorced. To us, that feels like an accomplishment.

INTRODUCTION

As soon as Melissa and I got engaged, the relationship book recommendations came pouring in. Some were written by pastors, others by psychologists, and others still by self-help gurus. Each one was filled with neat-and-tidy programs and principles, acronyms and aphorisms, systems and silver bullets. Who knew that making marriage work was as simple as following seven principles or that love operated according to four universal laws?

Captivated by the promises made on the books' covers, Melissa and I read a stack of them. One book would help couples like us "save your marriage before it starts." The author's pessimistic outlook—predicting that every relationship would end in failure if left to its own devices—felt bleak. Another book taught us to communicate using a list of love languages, which were limited to five that would suit every person in the world. Teenage Dustin was pretty bummed to discover that "sex" was not recognized as an official relational dialect. (Although wasn't "acts of service" sort of open to interpretation?)

Melissa and I still laugh at how unhelpful those books were. They were so useless, without exception, that they made us wonder if the friends who recommended them to us were actual humans in relationship with other actual humans.

The failure of modern marriage books is not due to poorly written content. They were written better than this one, I promise. Their failure didn't result from lack of information or research. They were better researched than mine. In fact, most of them referenced scientific studies and many of the programs had been tested in focus groups.

Their downfall is that they all began with a common assumption: all marriages are basically the same. The author would share a principle that improved *some* marriages, and the reader was just

INTRODUCTION

supposed to accept that this principle would improve *their* marriage too. It's a recipe for overpromising and underdelivering. And if there's one thing I know about, it's messing up recipes.

Let's just state the obvious: Whenever two people enter into a relationship, a one-of-a-kind creation emerges that has never existed and will never again exist. Each person brings a unique set of experiences and assumptions and beliefs and expectations and dreams with them into a marriage. They have a unique mix of emotional baggage that they may not even be fully conscious of. And in a marriage, unlike on Southwest Airlines, the bags do not fly free. They cost, at minimum, the money you spent on this book.

All of this creates a unique set of circumstances that will undoubtedly lead to (cue Liam Neeson's voice) a particular set of problems. Marriage books are written for the masses. They cannot possibly tailor their wisdom to every individual's needs and problems, which is why Melissa and I gave all the books away. (I would have burned them, but I've heard that's frowned upon and I'm bad at making fires anyways.)

A few years ago, I began to imagine a different kind of marriage book. One that was written for actual humans in relationship with other actual humans. A marriage book that recognized the one-of-a-kind nature of every marriage and refused to offer one-size-fits-all solutions destined to disappoint. And one that was willing to laugh at serious problems to take the edge off and lighten the mood.

This is kind of that book. I mean, it's trying to be that book for sure. But like I said, I was *imagining* it. So that book was way funnier, and on the cover it said "*New York Times* Bestseller" and I was skinnier with more hair.

I am not a marriage guru, and I don't play one on TV. (Although if you have a role open, let me know. I hear television pays better

INTRODUCTION

than comedy clubs). Instead, I'm writing this book as someone who, like you, is in a messy marriage with a unique mix of problems that need to be managed effectively if we hope to avoid an expensive first date with a divorce attorney.

Being married to another human, even for a long time, doesn't make me an expert in marriage. It makes me an expert only in being married to my spouse. I am the world's leading expert in how to be married to Melissa. I'm the only living human who has ever done it, and I've been doing it for half of my life. In this book, I've compiled the most hilarious and helpful wisdom I've learned from my experience. If it's not that funny or helpful, I'm sorry; it's the best I got. Besides, quit being so critical. You didn't write a book. (My apologies to all authors reading this.)

The discussion that follows taps into some of the most common reasons married couples get divorced. While some people need to divorce to establish physical safety or emotional well-being, because you're reading this book, I'm going to assume that you and your partner would like to stay married for the foreseeable future—and actually enjoy being in relationship too. That means we need to talk about difficult topics like finances, physical health, sex, and faith.

Since I'm a comedian, you can expect a lot of jokes about each of these things. I know, I know. Your therapist told you that marriage was no laughing matter, but I beg to differ. When we laugh at the hard things, they become a little easier to bear. A lot of the stories and advice in this book will make you laugh—and also improve your marriage. The rest of it will also make you laugh but won't apply to your unique situation. Feel free to eat the fish and spit out the bones.

Before our big day, Melissa and I enrolled in premarital counseling through our church. Normally this would be performed by

INTRODUCTION

a pastor, but we requested to work with an older married couple we knew. Melissa and I came to adore Geno and Rhea. They were funny and insightful, didn't take themselves too seriously, and were clearly in love. Geno was retired from the Coast Guard and Rhea was a nurse.

Geno and Rhea had selected one of those marriage books to guide our sessions together. The book came with weekly assignments, which had the effect of making marriage feel like homework. Once a week for a couple of months, Melissa and I would show up at their house, book in hand, ready for a deep discussion related to our weekly assignments. Thank God, Geno and Rhea rarely stuck to the script. They knew marriage was more like music than math. So this wise couple spent most of our time together sharing specific stories from their marriage. Geno and Rhea told us about their ugliest fights and how much they hurt. They shared areas of disagreement and how they'd navigated them. They asked us to consider which of their practices might work well for our relationship, and they gave us permission to toss the rest.

In twenty years Melissa and I have never referred to that (or any) marriage book we studied during our premarital counseling. But we've recalled Geno and Rhea's stories numerous times. For example, when Geno returned home after months of deployment, he and Rhea scattered coins all over their backyard and then asked their kids to retrieve them all. This created enough free time to, you know, do the thing you do when you've been separated a while. Melissa and I have never scattered literal coins across our property because, well, who has coins anymore? Not sure a debit card would do the trick. Yet whenever I return home from a comedy tour, we carve out time to be together—just like the principle we learned from Geno and Rhea.

INTRODUCTION

My hope is that this book will become your weekly sit-down with Geno and Rhea, or in this case, Dustin and Melissa. You won't find a lot of charts and graphs, but you will encounter tools to hopefully help you compile a unique set of practices that can work for you.

DUSTIN NICKERSON

**Bean bag in my daughter's bedroom,
Winter 2020**

Chapter 1

If You Like *Fight Club*, You'll Love Marriage

A couple of years ago, a *Huffington Post* lifestyle reporter asked readers to share the details of the fight that ended their marriage. An unfortunate man named Kyle said his seven-year marriage fizzled over a fight about lunch. A woman named Cherie recounted her eighteen-year marriage ending over a fight about her cell phone usage. And Matt's marriage crashed and burned when he called his children from a previous marriage "my girls."¹

I think as an unmarried person you read those stories and say, "Oh my, I can't believe a marriage ended over something so small and petty." But as a married person, we read that and go, "Yeah, I can see that." That's because we know the arguments themselves are never the issue. They're always a symptom of the deeper problem.

In the twenty years that we've been together, Melissa and I have survived an estimated 82,396 spats. If current trends persist, that

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

number should increase by at least a thousand by the time of this book's publication. (Yes, that's correct. Writing a marriage book has *increased* the number of marital fights in my home.) While every fight in our home is different, they are always about something very, *very* important.

And I know for a fact it's not just us. To this day, I've never met a couple who didn't have at least one board-game fight. I've also never met a couple whose wounds from their board-game fights ever fully healed.

Yes, I've heard horror stories of games of Settlers of Catan that led to husbands settling on the couch. Games of Monopoly that left wives morally bankrupt. And games of Life that almost ended an actual life.

Melissa and I's board-game brawl was during a game of Scattergories in 2004, and it's been a point of tension for almost eighteen years. I promise you, she is seething right now realizing that this is being published without her getting to tell her side of the story.

If you're not familiar with this game, it's simple. Someone says a category, and you list something in that category that starts with the assigned letter. So if the category is Colors and the letter is *B*, you write down "blue" and the judge gives you a point. Simple. Fun. Anyone can win. The perfect setting for a verbal brawl that will be remembered for decades.

So here we are, playing a wholesome game of Scattergories with some friends and family. We are in the first home we lived in together, drinking hot chocolate, and laughs are abounding. It's the scene of a modern-day Rockwell. The only problem is that as the game is winding down to its last round, Melissa and I are tied for first place. Whoever gets the next point wins the game.

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

The category: Things in the Ocean.

The letter: *W*.

The timer starts.

Melissa immediately buckles under the pressure and writes “whale.” This is, of course, accurate but if any other player has the same answer, you don’t get the point. There’s no way someone else isn’t gonna write “whale.” A complete choke from Melissa.

I dig deep. I pass over my initial thought of “whale” and reach to the depths of the ocean itself as the buzzer sounds.

I write “water.”

Because what, if not water, is in the ocean?

But I know I will need to do some convincing. This will not be accepted without heated debate.

Melissa reads “whale” and it gets canceled out immediately. There’s no way that basic answer was making it through. She knows she blew it and that her only hope is to tear me down. She’s in a desperate situation. It’s honestly a little sad and pathetic. But she’s no quitter, and I admire her tenacity.

I say, “Water.”

The group is instantly divided. I knew it was going to come down to a vote. I make my case. Very articulately, I appeal to the judges (the other players) that the ocean is *not* water; nay, it *has* water. It is full of many things. The ocean is no more water than it is seaweed and fish. “Ocean” is simply the collective term for all the things that make up that which is the sea. I remind them the sky is not air; it *has* air.

The judges are persuaded. Water is in the ocean.

Melissa is furious. She rolls her eyes so far to the back of her head they touch her shoulder blades. I tell her, “There was a vote! If you’re upset, you’re not upset with me. You’re upset with

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

democracy.” Melissa’s anger is tearing down society—that’s what I’m getting at.

Note for Melissa reading this at home: I know this isn’t how you remember the story but (a) it’s how I remember and (b) it’s much funnier this way. They paid us a decent amount of money to write this book, so let me punch it up a bit.

Sometimes you have a fight so big it doesn’t end the game; it ends the party. That’s what this fight was. A game of Scattergories caused our friends to scatter from our home.

MELISSA’S POV

Dustin paints a lovely picture here, but you should know that earlier in the game, he’d convinced our friends to vote down my A word, *air*, by arguing that it was not found in the sky.

Why, oh why, did we put Scattergories on our wedding registry?!

This is a prime example of a silly fight that was about something else. Of course we weren’t fighting about the game and silly words. So what was it about, then?

For starters, we both hate to lose. We’re prideful. We’re competitive. Melissa has constantly been compared to her high-achieving siblings, and I constantly needed to be good at things to prove my self-worth. In our different ways, we both feel we lack value, and we project those insecurities onto each other.

Plus, winning is *way* more fun. Just ask me after the game of Scattergories.

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

But since that fateful day, we've grown. We've progressed as a couple and all our fights have been much more serious in subject matter ever since. Because Melissa and I would *never* fight about something silly again, right?

Hahahahahaha. Wrong.

In fact, just last week, we had a serious disagreement about an incredibly weighty matter, which went down like this:

Dustin: Being on the road is really taking a toll on me, you know? I'm exhausted from traversing the country like this.

Melissa: Traversing?

Dustin: Yeah, traversing. You know, like traveling, jet-setting, exploring.

Melissa: (*laughing*) Have you been reading a thesaurus behind my back?

Dustin: What's that supposed to mean?

Melissa: I've just never heard you use that word before, that's all.

Dustin: Is *traverse* the only word in that entire sentence that you managed to hear?

Melissa: No. But it struck me as odd. I mean, you managed to get a college diploma without ever taking the SAT. Are you still trying to prove something with vocabulary words?

I should pause here and point out that Melissa was making a factually true statement. Due to a procedural issue, I managed to get accepted to the University of Washington, an academically rigorous school, without taking the SAT. Melissa's dad once told

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

me, a while after I graduated, that I should go back and take the SAT “just to see how you measure up.” So I feel insecure whenever anyone brings it up.

MELISSA'S POV

Since Dustin is being so honest, I will share that my SAT score was the lowest of my siblings'. It's too bad the SAT doesn't take into account how many school dances and food drives you plan. Those dance themes and invitations didn't make themselves. What I lack in academic prowess, I make up for in my creative aesthetics of art and design. (Did you see me sneak those SAT words in there?)

My SAT scores are one of my and Melissa's trip wires. You know, those issues and events that, if brought up, will immediately trigger all-out guerrilla warfare. Melissa and I have learned it's better for us to identify and even name our trip wires so we can do a better job avoiding them. This day, however, Melissa tripped my SAT wire, and I erupted like Mount Saint Helens.

I'll spare you all the gory details, but our fight turned out to be one for the books. A real dandy. It had everything a person could hope for in a marital spat—lots of action, tons of defensiveness, a handful of haymaker insults. I even told her I thought she'd inherited the worst traits of both of her parents, which went over about as well as you might imagine. In hindsight, we should've sold tickets to the neighbors. For more than an hour,

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

our kitchen was basically a *Rocky* sequel. Minus the presence of a muscular man, of course.

All of this because of a stupid vocabulary word. And Melissa wasn't even trying to start a fight. She just noticed something and commented. Looking back on that conversation, here's a breakdown translating our communication:

Dustin: Being on the road is really taking a toll on me, you know? I'm exhausted from traversing the country like this.

Translation: I am tired. The road is hard. Please empathize.

Melissa: Traversing?

Translation: Dustin has never said that word before, and it caught my attention.

Dustin: Yeah, traversing. You know, like traveling, jet-setting, exploring.

Translation: Does she not know what that word means?

Melissa: (*laughing*) Have you been reading a thesaurus behind my back?

Translation: Is he saying I'm stupid?

Dustin: What's that supposed to mean?

Translation: Is she saying I'm stupid?

Melissa: I've just never heard you use that word before, that's all.

Translation: I've just never heard you use that word before, that's all.

Dustin: Is *traverse* the only word in that entire sentence that you managed to hear?

Translation: Why don't you care about the way I'm feeling, and why do you think I'm stupid?

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

Melissa: No. But it struck me as odd. I mean, you managed to get a college diploma without taking the SAT. Are you still trying to prove something with vocabulary words?

Translation: You're projecting on me and I don't want any of that, so let me unravel you.

This is what I mean when I say that the fights are never about the fight themselves. Fights are the cracks in sidewalks caused by the roots from the tree in the yard.

Activity Time!

You're gonna fight—it happens. It's not an *if*, it's a *when* and *what about*. With that in mind, here are some low-stakes topics that, in my experience, are fairly safe to fight about. Remember when you were a kid and you'd play poker with the chips, but they didn't represent money? It's like that.

- Best episode of your favorite show
- Is ketchup on eggs a sin against God?
- Worst band of the '90s (there are no wrong answers, but "Limp Bizkit" is the right answer)
- Dumbest thing we studied too much in school
- More embarrassing footwear: Crocs or Heelys?
- Best Dorito flavor
- Of the family uncles, which one is the worst?

Happy fighting!

Planes, Trains, and Anger Mobiles

Melissa and I have learned that location makes a difference. Our fights may be private or public, by ourselves or in the presence of friends, sitting on the couch or standing on aisle 5 of the grocery store. But our worst fights happen when one of us is driving. I don't know what it is about sitting in a car that makes our claws come out, but we have had our best and biggest fights there. Our 2013 Honda Odyssey basically becomes the Roman Colosseum on wheels. Minus the presence of a muscular man, of course.

What is it about automobiles that brings out the boxing gloves?

I think it's because it takes a lot of energy to remain alert to other drivers while observing traffic signals so that you don't die before picking up your dry cleaning. Listen, I'm already grumpy if I have to both get dressed *and* leave the house. So if you add a traffic jam to the equation, even asking me a question is a hazard to your physical and emotional health. It doesn't help that I get carsick, and because of that, I do 100 percent of the driving (when I'm not puking) and insist on controlling the music with the tyranny of a less-than-benevolent dictator.

There's also the fact that while riding in a car, you're trapped. Cruising down the interstate at sixty-five miles per hour, you have nowhere to go. It's just you, your spouse whom you currently wish wasn't your spouse, and two lava-hot coffees between you. Have I ever been tempted to throw my coffee at Melissa? No, absolutely not. I'm not a monster. But have I ever hoped Melissa would sip her coffee, burn her tongue, and lose the ability to talk for an hour? I mean, technically no, but it was very easy for me to imagine that scenario right now, so draw your own conclusions.

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

It's a Family Tradition

I am pretty sure I inherited my championship car-boxing skills from my parents. They got divorced in 1990 when I was in kindergarten. That same year my grandpa died and my dog Murphy left. No, Murphy didn't run away. He left. He legit packed up his belongings and trotted down the street to another family's house and decided to live there instead. Basically, 1990 was the 2020 of my childhood.

I don't remember much about the years when my parents were married. But I do recall my dad's big blue Chevy conversion van. It had track lighting and a bed. A road trip dream. He nicknamed it the Enterprise, since he loved *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and that was the only thing that made him feel like Jean-Luc Picard. In hindsight, the Enterprise was the perfect name for Dad's van because whenever we climbed inside of it, danger ensued and shields were raised.

One time my parents, my sister, and I had been seated in the car for less than a minute when an argument ensued. The insults bounced back and forth like a Ping-Pong ball. I have no idea of what was actually said. I just know they were mad and it was loud. As I look back on the story, as a current car fighter in my prime, I'm almost impressed. I mean, we hadn't even pulled out of the driveway yet.

Another time, a particularly nasty fight broke out when my father was driving the family down the highway. Having had her fill, Mom screamed at Dad to stop the van and let her out. He complied, and she flung open the door with the strength of a Klingon and started to step out. That's when I unbuckled my seat belt and declared, "I'm getting out too." (Man oh man, was I ever

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

a mama's boy.) As I collected my belongings, Mom looked at me and then looked at Dad. She climbed back in, and we drove off in silence. Speaking as a parent today, I know that nothing is quite as sobering as one of my children having to become the only adult in the room. I'd love to say that's never happened to us. But I couldn't say it hasn't happened to us this week.

I don't judge my parents for these car fights. In fact, I've carried on their legacy. I'd like to say that once Melissa and I realized how I replicated my parents' unhealthy pattern, we worked with a licensed therapist to create a system to prevent car fights. But nope. We haven't done that. Melissa and I are the kind of couple who want to improve our marriage but sometimes resist doing the work and making necessary changes. (I'm sure you don't know any other couples like us.)

The Hazards of Mixing Exercise with Arguing

During the coronavirus pandemic it became clear that we should absolutely never have a fight while performing physical exercise of any kind. Soon after COVID-19 broke out, Melissa and I took up running together. Yep, things had gotten so bad that we were forced to resort to cardiovascular exercise. It was a tough time for all of us. But it turned out to be the perfect hobby for me during this terrible time because it helped me keep everything in perspective: No matter how uncertain life felt and no matter how bleak the news was, I could trust that running would always be the absolute worst part of the day.

But let me clarify. When I say that Melissa and I took up

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

running, I mean that *I* took up running. Before the pandemic, I would go on an occasional “run,” which always started as a joke and then slowly devolved into a walk. On the other hand, Melissa has always been a prolific runner. And she’s not the “take a selfie at the local ‘Mimosas and Mojito 5K’” type of runner either. She’s the kind of runner who does it until she sweats. When I met her, I had just quit all sports after my sophomore year in high school and was gaining weight like I was getting ready to be butchered. She was a high school track-and-field star who would go on to be a collegiate runner. (What were her personal records and placements in state? Please don’t ask, because that’s another trip wire.) But during the pandemic Melissa and I took up running together.

One particularly hot San Diego afternoon, we had a disagreement about finances. We were planning a charity event and disagreed over how much money should be allocated for a donation. Melissa handles our finances, so she tends to be more fiscally conservative. Since I am relationally insecure, I tend to use material gifts to gain others’ approval.

Now here’s the thing about being married to someone as long as I have been married to Melissa: whenever you’re losing an argument, you can *always* weaponize history. If I feel backed into a corner or out of options, I reach for the past and club her with it. That day, as we rounded a turn and approached a fork in the road—both literally and metaphorically—I told Melissa she was “being cheap, like always.” (You know it’s a banger of a fight when you drop in an “always” like that.)

And that’s when Melissa did her best Robert Frost impression and took the road less traveled. She took the fork in the road, turning down a less busy street than our normal route. Melissa was smart enough to realize that no one is obligated to dialogue with

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

a person who is insulting them. She stepped away to calm down. Because she did, I was able to catch my breath too.

Melissa and I have learned that our marriage is best served when we are arguing about the right *what* in the right *where*. That means that going on a run when we're already angry is, um, ill-advised. It's just not wise for us to engage in a physical activity that increases our body temperature when our emotions are already hot. When we violate this rule, we've realized that taking a solo walk is a pretty good idea.

That day, Melissa beat me home by ten minutes. I entered the house and immediately apologized for calling her cheap. Now that our anger had had time to cool, we were able to talk and better understand where each of us was coming from. And that helped us move on.

Apologies and Acceptance

No matter where a fight erupts, or why, we believe it's critical that we end it in the right way. This usually means that someone—perhaps, ahem, me—needs to apologize for something. Contrary to popular belief among husbands, conceding a point is not the same as saying “I'm sorry.” Sometimes I miscommunicate, crack a joke in poor taste, criticize Melissa's parenting decisions, or sit down for dinner and mutter, “Really? We're having chicken again?” The only solution to my comments is a heartfelt apology.

I've heard other marriage-guru types say you need to learn to “fight well.” I disagree. You need to learn how to *end* the fight well. There are a lot of poor ways to end fights, and I'm pretty sure we've used all of them. Cheap shots and low blows, ultimatums,

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

sarcasm, shutting down . . . I mean, these are all textbook Dustin-and-Melissa fight moves.

But every once in a while we like to break script and *not* end a fight poorly. We'll decide to take a minute to cool down, maybe remove ourselves from the situation to calm our chaotic emotions, and once in an especially blue moon, one of us might even try to understand where the other person is coming from. If you've ever seen one of us do this, it's essentially the same as spotting Bigfoot.

That's because ending fights is hard. You can be feeling so many things: anger, hurt, sadness, competitiveness, contempt, pride. And no matter what you're feeling, you're feeling it at 100 percent. There is no subtlety in emotions or feelings during fights.

Recently a friend told me that she and her boyfriend have a safe word that, when used, immediately ends the fight. I told her that's not what most couples use safe words for.

She responded that a therapist gave her the idea and it's been very helpful. Their word is *Pop-Tart*, and if either of them uses it, the other person has to respect their partner in that moment and stop arguing. The fight ends right there, no matter what.

This sounds like a great idea, but I'll tell you, it wouldn't work with Melissa and me. I have a bad memory and a bad temper. That means I'm going to forget the word and she's going to get mad at me for saying "papaya" out of nowhere.

Conceding can be a struggle for some people, and by some people, I mean me. Even though my first job as a teenager was at AMC Theatres and my job title was literally Concessionist, I'm still no good at it. Luckily, Melissa isn't either. She will be the first to tell you that she is not an apologizer. It's just not her thing. Never has been. She's lovely and kind and—except for the one time that she had too many IPAs and declared to the entire Red Robin

If You Like Fight Club, You'll Love Marriage

parking lot in Salem, Oregon, that she was “incredibly talented”—humble. But she has a hard time apologizing.

MELISSA'S POV

It was two IPAs on our anniversary-slash-work trip. And yes, this character trait of mine is entirely true. I'm almost forty years old and still struggle to apologize. My preference is to just sweep conflict under the rug and move on, completely avoiding the elephant in the room. Who says avoidance isn't healthy?

No matter which of us has caused the hurt, we find a way to set aside our pride, understand the other person's feelings, and eventually say we're sorry. Sometimes, however, the solution to a fight isn't an apology. It's acceptance. Melissa and I disagree about a lot of issues and ideas, and in many cases, no amount of arguing will fix that.

This became clear during a clash Melissa and I had in our kitchen soon after our second child, Gloria, was born. The location was a better setting than our minivan. It was still a tight space, but at least it had multiple exits and we weren't moving at breakneck speed. It was one of those spats where neither of us had any idea what we were fighting about anymore or how to make the other person feel better.

Exasperated, I asked Melissa to just tell me what I could do to fix the problem. She took a deep breath and I could see her genuinely trying to articulate how she thought and felt. After a minute,

HOW TO BE MARRIED (TO MELISSA)

she calmly replied, “There is nothing you can do to make me feel better.”

At that point, I could either continue our pointless battle or accept that we had reached an impasse. Melissa’s response brought us back to reality: sometimes there isn’t a solution. Life is hard, and we were feeling the pressures of it all. Once we accepted reality, the tension released.

I’ve decided that if I want to be married to Melissa, then we should try to recognize why we’re fighting, become aware of the bad habits we adopted from our own parents, and resist the temptation to vent our anger in the wrong place or at the wrong time. And when I forget these best practices, I need to swallow my pride and either apologize for my behavior or accept the differences in our perspectives.

That being said, water is for sure *in* the ocean.