

Your wedding ring is not a magic shield

NICOLE PAJER

May 18, 2016

When a trusted friend made an unwanted advance, it changed the way I thought about married life.



Kate Daigneault | Stocksy United

Early on in my marriage, I was hiking at a popular Los Angeles park with my neighbor, my usual workout buddy. We were running down a gravel trail when suddenly he became quiet.

“What’s your deal today?” I questioned, not at all prepared for his response.

“It’s hard to work out with you sometimes,” he mumbled.

“Why?” I asked, a knot forming in my stomach.

“Because I have to run behind you, which is extremely distracting. It’s like dangling a carrot in front of me.”

A surge of instant discomfort engulfed me. I slowed down to a trot and flashed him an incredulous look, though safely behind my oversized sunglasses.

“Well, clearly that’s an indication that you’re not pushing hard enough. If you were in good shape, you’d be running in front of me and we wouldn’t have this problem.” I laughed awkwardly, hoping that would be the end of it.

I went home and shook it off. *He must have just been having a bad day*, I told myself.

“

Wanna go for a hike?” he asked. I shook off the feeling that maybe I shouldn’t and typed, “Yes” before I had a chance to change my mind. On the walk downstairs, everything in my body told me this is a bad idea.

I met Rodney (name changed to protect privacy) when he moved to California to make it as a musician. He’s a singer who hired Greg, my guitarist husband, to play in his band. When Rodney relocated from Texas, Greg helped him find an apartment in our building. Rodney, an avid runner, liked to hit the streets after dark, just like I did. Greg’s knee had been bothering him and he didn’t want me pounding the pavement in the dark alone. So it only seemed natural that Rodney become my workout companion.

Over the next year and a half, Rodney and I logged many hours running together. I’d give him advice about his music career and listen to him vent about his ex wife. It cleared his head and distracted me as I rounded another corner in my running shoes. He was the perfect exercise companion and became a good friend.

Several days after the uncomfortable comment, I was working from home when a Facebook message popped up,

“Wanna go for a hike?” said Rodney.

I shook off the feeling that maybe I shouldn't and typed, "Yes" before I had a chance to change my mind. I had eaten my weight in carrot cake the night before and was definitely in need of a heavy sweat session. On the walk downstairs, everything in my body told me *this is a bad idea*.

Twenty steps outside the door, Rodney invited me to go to Kauai with him and his daughter. A half mile later, he ran his fingers across my waist as he pulled me over to avoid "standing so close to the curb." By the hike's summit, he was rambling off his *fourth* sexual innuendo. I looked around in a panic. Where were all the Hollywood hikers with their breathless French bulldogs and Patagonia hoodies? Why was the trail suddenly so empty? I was overwhelmed with a nagging sense of danger but I kept my glaze forward as I suggested we pick up the pace. "You just have to make it home," I muttered to myself.

When I got in the door, I locked the deadbolt and jumped in the shower—but the 20-minute soak did nothing to erase the feeling of his hand on my rib cage. I began frantically purging Rodney from my digital life, as if erasing his number and blocking his Facebook profile would somehow disarm the situation. Then I poured a tall glass of Pinot Noir and plopped down on the couch with my dog. The next step was to tell Greg.

“

It was the first time in my married life that I entertained the thought of losing my husband. Things had been flowing so smoothly that I had forgotten the age-old adage: marriage takes work.

I ran through the scenario in my head over and over again. Greg had been playing in Rodney's band long before he knew me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that *I* was the one who was about to screw

up their friendship.

And aside from Greg losing a client, would this affect our marriage? In our brief time together, we'd never experienced anything like this. What if Rodney talked to him and told him a very different story? What if Greg thought this was my fault? Worse than that, what if he thought something had actually happened between us? It was the first time in my married life that I entertained the thought of losing my husband. Things had been flowing so smoothly that I had forgotten the age-old adage, marriage takes work.

Greg got home that evening, took one look at my face and asked what was wrong. I prefaced my story with the fact that I planned to never speak to Rodney again. He was mad, I could tell, but not at me. "What a creep!" he exclaimed. I had pictured Greg turning red upon hearing the news, breaking down Rodney's door and punching him in the gut, but I had underestimated my husband, both his faith in me and his self-control. We both decided severing all connections with Rodney would be the best way to handle it.

Later that night, an irrational sense of guilt still surfaced. *How could this have happened? Rodney knew I'm married. He's friends with my husband! We're just friends!* Then it dawned on me. I had spent the last few years of my life going about my business under the assumption that wearing a shiny diamond on my left hand would communicate everything that I needed it to—that I was happily married and therefore off limits to the opposite sex.

Greg proposed to me in Lake Tahoe with a radiant diamond ring. "People are going to see it from across the street," I said proudly as I slipped it on for the first time. But I quickly learned that "engaged" still meant "fair game," at least to the arsenal of wannabe actors that I continuously encountered around Hollywood. A year later, marriage added an eternity band and I was certain this would change everything. Marriage was much more serious.

“

Looking back, I realized there were warning signs. I just didn't see them.

So the Rodney situation left me completely perplexed. Not only had he seen my ring—and ankle tattoo from my honeymoon that matches the one on Greg’s shoulder—he knew how happy I was. He even collected our mail when we went away on romantic weekends in wine country.

Looking back, I realized there *were* warning signs. I just didn’t see them. I was freshly married at the time, still in my 20s, and had naively assumed that everyone would respect the institution of marriage the same way that my husband and I did. There would be others down the road who would say inappropriate things and spout out come-ons, in spite of me being committed to Greg, but I learned to recognize and abort those situations a whole lot faster. I made a point of better managing my relationships with male friends. Unlike with Rodney, with whom I openly discussed my dating past while giving him advice about his current pursuits, I set boundaries. And if anyone ever made me feel uncomfortable, I was quick to remind them that I was happily spoken for and not interested.

Greg eventually ran into Rodney in the elevator. As the door opened, my former friend sheepishly muttered, “I’m moving out” and pushed a shopping cart full of appliances to his car. And then he was gone.

Rodney’s empty apartment was a constant reminder of what had happened. But it also served as a symbol of the strength of my relationship, because Rodney’s bad behavior, and how we handled it, was our first real marriage test—and we passed. Hours after the incident, Greg had wrapped his arms around me and reassured me that it was not my fault. We lay in bed that night and stewed over what Rodney could possibly have been thinking—but we eventually abandoned that conversation to discuss how lucky we are to have found each other. We reminisced about what we said in our self-written vows barefoot in the sand during our beachfront Maui wedding and promised to never let anyone ever come between us. We recalled promising in front of God that we’d be together “for better or for worse” and joked that Rodney was definitely our first “for worse.”

NICOLE PAJER

Nicole Pajer is a freelance writer published in The New York Times, Woman’s Day, Men’s Journal, Hemispheres, and Rolling Stone. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, energetic doberman pup, and rat terrier.



Write a comment

o COMMENTS

SUBSCRIBE RSS
