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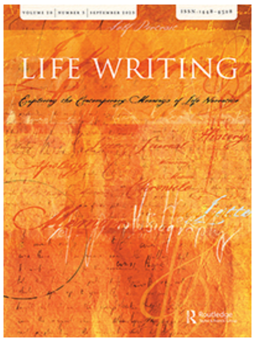

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OPEN ACCESS

Couples: A Collective Life

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ABSTRACT

This creative-critical essay tells the collective life story of couples, by drawing together memoir and other texts (film, art, photography, biographical fragments) and social observation. It is inspired by two things: the 'immersive coupledom' (Laura Kipnis's term) enforced by the Covid lockdowns; and a series of recent essay-cum-memoirs that have explored the experience either of being single or being in a couple. These books note the resilience of 'the couple norm' even as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements have challenged other societal norms. My essay also examines my own life as a single man, but tangentially, by considering its opposite: coupledom. Unpacking the unquestioned norm of coupledom is, I argue, a way of thinking about the hidden strangeness of our mundane lives—how love and care get routinised, and how the stories we tell about human relationships become true by default. But I also suggest that coupledom can't just be reduced to a story, a heteronormative convention. A couple is, like the human beings who comprise it, a beautiful, maddening, undeterminable mess. Every couple is a social invention, but also a one-off, an anomaly, a dataset of one.

KEYWORDS
Coupledom; singledom; monogamy; memoir

Couples. I see them checking into rooms together in hotel lobbies, waving grown-up children off through train windows and then turning round sadly, sat in companionable taciturnity at café tables, or walking round supermarkets—one with the trolley and one with the list—picking jars off shelves. In public, humans mostly come in pairs. I can always tell if they are a couple, and not just two friends or co-workers walking in tandem. They don't have to be embracing or holding hands or gazing into each other's eyes, and rarely are. I just know.

Look at David Hockney's 1977 painting, *My Parents*, which is heart-achingly tender, or pitilessly clear-eyed, or both, I can never decide. When his parents sat for it, they were both in their seventies, and had been married for nearly fifty years. Hockney's mother, Laura, occupies a dining chair, legs together and hands folded on lap, and is gazing firmly at her son. His father, Kenneth, is sat to one side, loose-limbed, animated and oblivious, reading an art book. Even though they are several feet apart and take no account of each other's presence, they are, definitively, a couple.

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Around longstanding couples exists a force field of unostentatious togetherness, years in the making. Here are two people who have caught each other's colds, vacuumed up the dust made of each other's dead skin, toenail cuttings and clothing lint, and seen every type and iteration of each other's bodily fluids. 'We used to have a kind of proverb', Amos Oz writes in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, 'that when you really love someone, then you even love their handkerchief' (Oz 2005, 176).

*

A series of recent books have shed light on the experience of *not* being in a couple. They are part of a thriving contemporary genre: the essay-cum-memoir, a fertile space for mixing intense feeling with careful thought, emotional with intellectual insight. A non-exhaustive list of these books about being single would include Kate Bolick's *Spinster* (2015), Glynnis MacNicol's *No One Tells You This* (2018), Donna Ward's *She I Dare Not Name* (2020), Emma John's *Self Contained* (2021), Aimée Lutkin's *The Lonely Hunter* (2022), Amy Key's *Arrangements in Blue* (2023). All, in their different ways, examine a surprising phenomenon: 'the tenacity of the couple-norm' (Roseneil et al. 2020). Over the last few decades, throughout much of the world, women have achieved greater economic and social independence, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements have reshaped societal norms, and people can divorce with greater ease. More people live or parent alone, or separate their romantic relationships from their living arrangements. Yet cohabiting couples remain the template, the factory setting. If anything, as Sasha Roseneil writes, the couple norm 'is becoming more visible and potent as other norms of intimate and family life have been withering' (Roseneil 2020).

These essay-memoirs uncover what Roseneil calls our 'normative unconscious'—the tacit expectations and social penalties that enforce the couple norm. Ward writes of the childless never-marrieds as 'disappeared in plain sight' (Ward 2020, 145). MacNicol is interested in what it means to live a life that 'had officially become the wrong answer to the question of what made a woman's life worth living' (MacNicol 2018, 12). Key dissects the 'bizarre shame' of being single, that feeling of 'failure to hit an imaginary deadline for graduating into real life' (Key 2023). Lutkin notes our tendency to see loneliness as a personal failing when, in a world that fails to nurture forms of intimacy beyond the nuclear family, it is really 'the inevitable outcome of the way people are forced to live' (Lutkin 2022).

All these books are by women. I know of only one recent book that reflects on the experience of single men like me: the German writer Daniel Schreiber's brief essay, *Alone* (Schreiber 2023). I know why the single woman is more of a story: the historical stigmatising of the 'spinster', and the continuing stress in a patriarchal society on women's destiny as heterosexual marriage and children. But I worry that, without this narrative to kick against, it might be even more silently shaming to be a single man. It is certainly more suspicion-inducing. Men on their own are more likely to be stopped by customs or security, targeted by drunks in search of aggro, or simply avoided as an unknown quantity and potential threat. I once walked through a busy town centre with a bloodied head after tripping and cracking my skull on the pavement, and everyone gave me a wide berth.

Being single is a banally practical as much as an emotional problem. Lots of domestic tasks, for instance, need at least two people to complete them: building a self-assembly bed; changing a pendant light bulb on a high ceiling; moving a large item of furniture from one room to another; giving a sizeable, dirty dog a bath. Living on your own, I have found, is mostly a series of dull precautions—like always having my keys in my hand when I close my front door, because no one has another set. Or never entirely shutting a door in my house, after I got locked in the bedroom when the doorknob broke.

Another practical problem, dining alone in a restaurant, is something I only do if it is unavoidable. Amy Key discusses the need to appear occupied with 'the props of the solo diner'—a book and smartphone—however impractical this is (it being hard to read and eat, or scroll and eat, at the same time). Nancy A. Scherl's photographs of solo diners around New York (Scherl 2022) reveal an unstated, even unspeakable truth of social life: single people are not meant to be this conspicuous. Restaurants are contrived places. We go there to eat in public, while all the time pretending that we are invisible to the other diners, and that they are to us. The solitary diner queers the pitch because, with no partner to look at, they can't help looking at the other diners, while also inviting their gaze. Dining on your own should not feel shameful. Everyone needs to eat, and not everyone has someone to sit facing them while they do it. One of my students, who waited tables, told me that waiters love solitary diners. They order and eat quickly, are polite and undemanding, and tip well. But since when was shame logical?

I don't want to write about something so shaming, however unjust the shaming feels. (The first few drafts of this essay didn't mention me at all.) One of the most powerful human instincts must be the need not to feel weird. I have spent my whole writing career artfully avoiding the personal—too painful, too mortifying, too difficult to retract. But perhaps I can write my story slant, by considering its opposite: coupledom. I have done this kind of thing for years, after all, as a scholar of everyday life. It was a way of putting my shyness and social awkwardness to good use. I turned myself into a sort of field biologist of the human race, trying to approach my subject with curiosity and gentleness rather than the resentment of the non-participant.

And I have long thought that the collective life story of couples could be a way of thinking about the hidden strangeness of our mundane lives—how love and care get routinised, how these routines regulate our lives, and how the stories we tell about human relationships become true by default. For if single people are rendered invisible by social norms, then so are couples. And then lockdown happened, and we were all imprisoned until further notice in these life choices made with differing degrees of absent-mindedness, and I started thinking about couples even more.

*

Romantic comedies often start with 'meet cutes', artful ways to bring the two leads together. In *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, Claudette Colbert and Gary Cooper form a pact while shopping for pyjamas: he only needs a top and she only needs a bottom. In *Singin' in the Rain*, Gene Kelly, playing a silent movie star, escapes from his screaming fans by jumping into a car driven by Debbie Reynolds, who starts screaming herself. In *The Glass Bottom Boat*, Rod Taylor's fishing rod snags Doris Day's mermaid tail as she swims underwater, dressed in costume entertaining tourists for her father's tour boat company. In *Serendipity*, Kate Beckinsale and John Cusack reach for the same pair of cashmere gloves while Christmas shopping in Bloomingdale's. In *The Wedding*

Planner, Matthew McConaughey shoves Jennifer Lopez out of the way of a dumpster truck when the heel of her shoe gets stuck in a manhole cover.

The joke of the rom com, and its seductive premise, is that who you spend your life with is not meant to be decided by such outrageous flukes. But real-life love stories can be equally arbitrary and improbable; the fact that two people are alive at the same time and get to meet is itself an outrageous fluke. Even when people's choice of partner is restricted, it is usually historical chance that restricts it. For centuries, couples met the same way: their family and kinship networks arranged it. The pragmatics of property ownership, rank and class mattered more than romantic love. Even when people had a choice, they didn't move around much, so mostly ended up with someone in the same village. As more young people moved to towns and cities, however, their options broadened. The invention of the bicycle widened the catchment area. In the early twentieth century, most British towns had a Sunday evening walkabout —a 'monkey walk' or 'monkey run'—where young people eyed and chatted each other up (Walton 2000, 738). From the 1920s onwards there were cinemas and dance halls. Cinema auditoria were handily unlit, and dance halls might have been designed as couple-making factories (heterosexual only) (Nott 2015, 183–208). Ballroom etiquette allowed for the unembarrassed bringing together of bodies (Langhamer 2013, 96). The swooning strains of 'Perfidia' or 'Begin the Beguine', and the soft light thrown by the slow-turning glitterball, did the rest.

After the second world war, the expansion of co-ed secondary schools, colleges and universities turned them into places for couples to meet (Langhamer 2013, 104). Many couples ended up spending their lives together because an August cut-off for the school year, or an accident of the alphabet, or the vagaries of a timetable, put them in the same class. Every love story, felt as utterly unique by its protagonists, is at the mercy of wider histories, borne along by social change like pollen on the air. Couples used to meet in air raid shelters; then they met while waiting for the same dryer at the launderette; now they meet in the huddle of banished smokers outside office buildings.

There is an app, what3words, that divides the whole world into 57 trillion three-metre squares, and then identifies each one of those squares using a unique combination of three words. *Moles like cakes*. *Huge lumpy head*. *Cats with thumbs*. You met your life partner because at some point, unlike almost all the eight billion other people alive, you landed on *huge lumpy head* or some other square together. Contiguity is all. Our genes mock our faith in free will in their scramble for survival. We have as little say over the process as the Las Vegas gambling addicts who think that, by pressing nudge and hold on the one-arm bandits, they can beat the casino. Couples retell their 'how we met' stories as proof of romantic destiny, but all that happened is that time and place converged. In Tracey Thorn's *My Rock 'n' Roll Friend*, about her friendship with the Go-Betweens' drummer Lindy Morrison, Lindy's father tells her: 'Love is geography' (Thorn 2021, 96).

*

But all this is changing. The Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld leads a long-running study on 'How Couples Meet and Stay Together'. Heterosexual couples in the US now most commonly meet online. In 2013, this method eclipsed meeting through friends for the first time, gay couples having passed the milestone much earlier (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen 2019). Now you don't need to land on the same three-metre square. You can slide into someone's DMs, arrange a hookup via WhatsApp, or swipe right and hope for a match. There are dating apps for every niche taste: bikers, farmers, dog people, cat people, non-drinkers, mullet sporters, Trump supporters, Disney fans, vegans, verified millionaires, short people, tall people, beautiful people (those not rated sufficiently pulchritudinous by other users within two days are thrown off the site), non-beautiful people (Ugly Bug Ball offers 'dating for the aesthetically average') and hairy people (Bristlr: 'connecting those with beards to those who want to stroke beards'). The business models of a handful of tech companies are engineering couple-making on an industrial scale, affecting the gene pool irrevocably.

This new culture is more than just a result of technological change. It is also a product of our free-market age and a tendency to view human beings as rational, utility-maximising consumers. We increasingly see relationships as working like a market in which we seek comparative advantage in our access to scarce resources. Resources are the utilities offered by a potential mate: quantity and quality of children, sexual gratification, recreation, companionship, culinary skills and so on. I have noticed that people younger than me, the ones who meet by swiping right, often express unease about the soulless instrumentality of the process. But they also wonder how anyone ever met anyone before. How could people have just left it mostly to dumb luck, and such a limited pool of candidates? Their incredulity makes sense if you actually do believe that humans function as bundles of rational self-interest, and that a date is essentially a job interview. The human heart, however, does not obey algorithms. There is no evidence that, amid these seemingly boundless digital opportunities for matching supply with demand, the efficiency of the process has been improved or the sum of romantic chaos and heartbreak reduced.

This is the uniting argument of a trilogy of recent essay-memoirs about coupledom: it is pointless trying to compute it with a cost–benefit analysis, balancing its pleasures against its annoyances. Devorah Baum's *On Marriage* argues that the institution 'is a source of perplexity … few people have the full measure of why they want or do it, and so their answers sound, to their own ears, unconvincing'. Each marriage is a leap of faith, a way of 'entering into the world in all its murk, muck and confusion', a recognition that every decision (from the Latin *de-caedere*, to cut off) murders all other possibilities, so you might as well make this choice as any (Baum 2023). Heather Havrilesky's *Foreverland: On the Divine Tedium of Marriage* examines the grey zone of her own marriage, a mix of conjugal irritation and battered love that is 'mundane and exotic at the same time' (Havrilesky 2022). Laura Kipnis, reflecting on the 'immersive coupledom' enforced by lockdown restrictions, argues that 'at best a couple is a workable neurotic pact … a balancing act between intimacy and disgust' (Kipnis 2022). All these writers remain partnered by the end of their stories, if not happily then not unhappily.

Coupledom can't be rationalised or overthought, only lived. A couple is, like the human beings who comprise it, a beautiful, maddening, undeterminable mess. As if to concede this stubborn fact, the market is reintroducing human contingency into the tech. New dating apps have emerged for those dismayed by the brutal logic of swiping right. On S'More, a blurred photo of your possible match unblurs slowly as you chat. On Chorus, you recruit friends to swipe on your behalf. On Twindog, you post a picture of your dog.

*

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* tells the story of her relationship with her genderfluid partner, Harry Dodge, in a series of prose fragments divided by white space. One fragment begins: 'And then, just like that, I was folding your son's laundry' (Nelson 2015, 12). Abrupt switches between sections convey the strangeness of the relationship's progress. How did we get here, Nelson seems to be asking herself, from ungovernable desire to the comforts and concessions of a 'normal', coupled, life?

The things we do every day tell us who we are. These desultory, unromantic acts may not be how we define ourselves, but they are how we choose, however distractedly, to spend our lives. A coupledom is made out of tens of thousands of kettles boiled, white and colour washes separately loaded, cat litter trays emptied and refilled. That transition from romantic compulsion to monogamous mundanity happens so slowly and so unspokenly that even the participants can fail to notice it. But when you shift scenes as Nelson does, like a jump-cut in a film, it is revealed as wonderful and strange. *And then, just like that, I was walking round Home Bargains with you, looking for a new toilet seat.*

*

Couples are made out of stuff, the stage props of joined lives: unmatched dinner plates from ten different sets, miscellaneous scuffed cutlery, CDs and DVDs with nothing to play them on anymore, unloved gifts you forgot to regift, a hallway full of shoes. At least a couple can share the blame for the mess this makes, because the mess made by two people is less mortifying than the mess made by one.

For his book *The Comfort of Things*, the anthropologist Daniel Miller conducted interviews, alongside his PhD researcher Fiona Parrott, with the residents of a street in suburban south London. Two of the interviews took place just before Christmas. In one house they found a retired couple, Mr and Mrs Clarke. The house was filled with Christmas decorations ready for the visit of their large extended family, and many other material traces of a long life of intimacy and conviviality. The richness of their surroundings matched the richness of their relationship. When interviewed, Mr and Mrs Clarke would gently correct and add details to each other's version of events. In this tender back and forth, Miller saw the 'gradual meshing over decades of what once must have included jagged edges and mismatched bits of personality' (Miller 2008, 24).

Behind another door they found a pensioner, George, who, after a lifetime of living in hostels, had been given his own flat. It contained no Christmas decorations—nothing, in fact, except the most rudimentary furniture. His trousers were creased and ironed, but in a way that suggested dressing for him was just an obligatory routine. It was not hard to imagine George as one of what the Japanese call *kodokushi* or 'lonely deaths', people so isolated at the end that their bodies lie undiscovered for months, until the stench from the decomposing corpse can't be ignored. The interviewers left George's flat in tears. This was a man, Miller wrote, 'more or less waiting for his time on earth to be over, but who at the age of seventy-six had never yet seen his life actually begin. And, worse still, he knew it' (17). The absence of care for material things reflected an emptied-out life devoid of anyone to share them with.

*

In her essay 'He and I', Natalia Ginzburg considers a couple who appear radically mismatched. Although not named, the 'He' of the title is her second husband, Gabriele Baldini, a literature professor at the University of Rome whom she married in 1950.

The ‘I’ is her. ‘He always feels hot, I always feel cold’, it begins (Ginzburg 1989, 35). The whole essay carries on in ‘He is this, I am that’ vein. He is assured, garrulous, a polyglot, an endlessly articulate expert on the theatre, music, wine and life; is a confident driver, an intrepid traveller, good at directions, can sing and dance, and loves background noise. She is self-doubting, clumsy, shy, a poor linguist and worse map reader; she falls asleep at concerts, hates travel, can’t sing, dance or drive and needs total silence to work. He is baffled and annoyed by her habits and moods; she evens the score by nagging. Ginzburg seems to shift perspective with each sentence, so it is never clear if ‘He’ or ‘I’ is right, and if she is lamenting or honouring their differences.

At the end, she abandons this ‘tomayto tomahto’ pattern and lands a sucker punch. She recalls their first walk together nearly twenty years earlier, along Rome’s Via Nazionale, back to her *pensione*—a walk that he confidently says he remembers too, but doesn’t. She sees these two people now as if they are both strangers to her—‘two friends talking, two intellectuals out for a walk; so young, so educated, so uninvolved, so ready to judge one another with kind impartiality; so ready to say goodbye to one another for ever, as the sun set, at the corner of the street’ (46). And a quasi-comical inventory of marital differences turns on a dime into something more profound—about how an alliance of great intricacy and oddity can be set in motion by one decisive act, like those epic domino topples where the nudge of a single tile sets off a spectacular run of three-dimensional stackings, rainbow-coloured spirals and gravity-defying climbs.

Newly-in-love couples want, in their self-absorption, to be alike. Longstanding couples know that this is impossible. How could you ever get your head around your loved one’s sudden fulminations about things that, objectively, don’t matter? How could you begin to share their all-consuming interest in things that are clearly uninteresting? When will you ever obtain a reliable forecast for their dark moods that arrive and lift suddenly like passing storms? Every human being is a moving target. By the time you adapt to their idiosyncrasies, they have already brought out a revised edition of themselves. You could no more read their mind than make sense of those gnomic phrases they utter in the dead of night with blood-curdling clarity, while they are asleep. Finally you give in: you will never decipher this person with whom you have built a life. ‘Love’, Iris Murdoch writes in one of her philosophical essays, ‘is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real’ (Murdoch 1959, 51).

One year, I set Ginzburg’s essay for my students. The class was unanimous. They saw it as the anatomy, unintended by the author, of a dysfunctional marriage. Why, they asked, did she stick with this mansplaining bully? The relationship was clearly toxic, probably abusive. That beautiful, blindsiding final paragraph failed to convert them. She should have given him the body swerve when she had the chance, one of them said. I haven’t taught that essay since.

*

On 24 March 2020, the UK’s first day of Covid lockdown, a press conference was held at No. 10 Downing Street. The deputy chief medical officer, Jenny Harries, was asked whether non-cohabiting couples could carry on seeing each other. She answered that they would either have to test the strength of their relationship by moving in together or avoid all contact indefinitely. The health secretary, Matt Hancock, standing next to her, added: ‘There we go—make your choice and stick with it’. Hancock later had to resign for breaking these same lockdown rules, after being caught on CCTV in his office, kissing a woman aide with whom he was having an affair.

Watching that press conference, I wondered how many members of newly-fledged couples it would send scrabbling around to pack an overnight bag. How odd that the state could determine, by punishment of a fine, with whom you could share a bed, a home, a life! And yet behind this single, decisive act lay a long history of the moral and legal policing of relationships, along with a whole series of residual, hetero-patriarchal assumptions about what constitutes the domestic norm. In my newly state-imposed solitude, I was forced to look afresh at this now entirely separate tribe of couples, viewing them from a distance through my window, or while clapping care workers on the doorstep, or while veering into the road to avoid them on the pavement.

In Britain, the spring and early summer of the first lockdown were eerily glorious. I found myself comfort-rereading J. L. Carr's novella *A Month in the Country*, set in the long, golden British summer of 1920, exactly a century earlier. The narrator, Tom Birkin, recalls the brief time he spent in the Yorkshire village of Oxgodby that summer. Tom is an art restorer, hired to uncover a medieval mural hidden beneath whitewash in the village church. His time in the first world war trenches has left him shell-shocked and his wife has just left him for another man. Unable to afford rent, he sleeps in the church's loft. In this state of utmost aloneness—one that, I couldn't help noticing, mirrored my own—he meets the beautiful and captivating vicar's wife, Alice Keach, and her dour, distant husband. Tom and Alice flirt to no purpose, and at the end he leaves her and the Reverend to their unlikely union. He wonders 'how the oddest people meet and then live together year after year, look at each other across hundreds of meals, watch each other dress and undress, whisper in the darkness, cry aloud in the marvellous agony of sexual release' (Carr 2000).

This sentence stuck in my head. Other people's relationships intrigue and mystify us. We are incurably influenceable beings, who can't help seeing other members of our species as illustrative examples of how to live our own lives. Being nosey about other people's relationships can be 'the beginning of moral inquiry', argues Phyllis Rose in *Parallel Lives*. Examining 'the primal stew of data which is our daily experience' is how we work through ideas about how to make liveable lives together (Rose 1984, 9, 6). But, as Carr's protagonist finds, this anthropological impulse comes up against the essential unteachability of human relationships and the basic unknowability of others. We will never understand how the strangest combinations of people manage to bump along together, in a rough approximation of contentment, for decades. If every person is a conundrum, then put two of them together and the puzzlement is not doubled but squared. A couple is an island on which only two people will ever land.

*

In an article published in November 2020, the journalist Claire Bushey wrote about how lockdown had clarified her life as a single person, one in which 'the care of others can feel like starlight: visible, yet too far away for warmth' (Bushey 2020). For Bushey, the pandemic, 'in its obvious externality', neatly illustrated how something that feels shaming—loneliness—is structural, an effect of the way that society is ordered. Like her, I felt that lockdown was concretising my loneliness, turning it from a dull, barely noticeable ache into something that couldn't be ignored. I saw for the first time, in this condition of compulsory solitude, that loneliness is not just the absence of something. It is its own separate state—in the same way that cold never feels like just the absence of heat, whatever a physicist might tell you.

Millions of us were now lab rats in an improvised, unwelcome social experiment in which we couldn't get closer than six feet to anyone else. The only things that linked me to other people were sound (their voices carried on waves through the air to my ears) and light (photons bouncing off them and gathering in the particle detectors of my eyes). Mostly this sound and light came through my tinny-sounding, slow-performing laptop. Psychologists have a term for the feelings of withdrawal and abandonment I was experiencing: 'skin hunger'. The need to hug someone—to feel the bones in their back, the rise and fall of their chest, their warmth and weight next to mine—became as unignorable as actual hunger.

It reminded me that a few years beforehand I had heard Bob Geldof being interviewed on the radio. He mentioned being on a plane just after his ex-wife, Paula Yates, had killed herself. He was single at the time and yet to meet his second wife. In two nearby seats, a young couple were arguing. Before they had even made up, the woman lightly touched the man's arm, and he briefly grabbed her hand. The meaning was clear: this argument was just a tiny blip in the long continuum of their life together. Geldof was overcome with longing for the intimacy it betrayed.

In public, couples jointly occupy the same territory. The rules of personal space, which prevent strangers getting too close, do not apply to them. They can absent-mindedly squeeze a shoulder, or lay an arm on a knee, without asking first. What is too awkward or ineffable to be put into words can be said with the silent language of touch.

*

In summer 2021, Covid restrictions were finally lifted in the UK. On 2 July, as the England men's football team made their way to the final of the Euros, the comedy writer Madeleine Brettingham tweeted about their manager. 'Gareth Southgate is the ultimate middle-aged crush', she wrote. 'I just want him to drive me to a colonoscopy appointment then sit outside eating a scotch egg in dignified silence'. The tweet went viral, and received hundreds of replies, mostly from women, riffing on the theme. 'He'll have the proper drill-in pegs to put your awning up at the caravan site', said one. 'I think he'd go to bed just before you and lay on your side, moving to the cold side so you can get into the Gareth-sized cocoon of warmth', said another. 'And he'd stack the dishwasher just the way you like it even though he secretly disagrees'.

Southgate is not a conventional heartthrob, but in interviews gives off an unwavering aura of sanity, sagacity and decency. Perhaps, in the strange mix of crisis and boredom that was lockdown, this felt newly noteworthy, even exciting. No one really knew if Southgate was good at erecting caravan awnings, or repointing patios, or sorting out the condiments shelf in the fridge, or putting the garden hose back on the reel without any kinks. But British women, and some men, had spotted in him that crucial quality of longsightedness. They had concluded, from admittedly circumstantial evidence, that he understood something important about love—that it is a living thing that shrinks and grows and that must adjust itself, as calmly as a robot vacuum cleaner, to the facts on the ground.

This type of love does not fit easily into narrative form. The great love stories—Orpheus and Eurydice, Lancelot and Guinevere, Vronsky and Anna Karenina, Pinkerton and Madame Butterfly, Lara and Dr Zhivago—are about couples separated and thwarted. In novels, the marriage plot ends with the betrothal. Rom Coms take us up to the first kiss. Love songs are about the huge, unbiddable chaos that two people can inflict on each other: the *coup de foudre* of new love, the agony of breakup, the torches we insist on carrying when the other person has put theirs out. Love songs don't tend to laud the beloved's skill at stacking the dishwasher. Yet this middle, muddling ground—maybe it needed lockdown to remind Southgate's admirers of this—is most of what love is. 'Sometimes love does not have the most honorable beginnings, and the endings, the endings will break you in half', Ann Patchett writes in *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. 'It's everything in between we live for' (Patchett 2013, 284).

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The Irish writer Sophie White, who trained as a chef, writes that being loved committedly by someone else provides 'the essential seasoning for our lives'. With a well-seasoned dish, you don't taste the salt; just enough is added to balance and harmonise the other flavours. With the other half of a couple, too, much of the time 'you are unaware of them, of the calming influence that they quietly bring to your days'. But you know when they are absent, just as you know when the salt is missing (White 2021).

Only in a couple can your unspoken needs be so understatedly fulfilled. At a dinner party, you need someone to smile across the table at you knowingly. At a standing party, you need someone to give you that little glance or raised brow that says it's time to go—otherwise you'll be pinned up against a bookcase for ever by that hot-breathed man who wants to talk about the film version of *The Hobbit*. You need someone to compare notes with afterwards, like theatre critics debriefing in the bar after press night. A couple is a benign conspiracy against everyone else in the world.

You need someone you can ring when you're running late to say, no, don't make me anything, I'll just get a sandwich, and yes, I'll be careful driving in the rain. You need someone to give your time alone a point and a purpose, a sense that it is bookended by your being with them. You could be struggling to sleep in an unfamiliar city, in a hotel room with a lumpy pillow and noisy aircon. Or stuck in a cookie-cutter conference centre off a ring road, drinking bad coffee and looking at PowerPoint slides in a too-small font. Or poking a sad vending machine salad with a plastic fork at the airport, paid for with meal vouchers because your plane is stuck on the runway. Still, you know that someone else—a human wireless device synched up with yours—is holding you in their head across all the miles that divide you.

In Philip Larkin's poem, 'Broadcast', he is listening to a live radio broadcast of a concert by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Hull's City Hall. In the audience is his lover, Maeve Brennan. He imagines her face rapt at the music, and her glove that has fallen unnoticed to the floor, and then tries to pick out her tiny hands in the applause at the end, even though he knows he can't. Larkin may have been the world's most uncommitted boyfriend, but he did make sense of what it feels like to be a couple apart from each other—that invisible thread of concern that links you across any distance, defeating the curvature of the earth.

And when the time arrives for you to occupy the same three-metre square again, you need someone to pick you up from the airport—the human version of baggage reclaim. After you've retrieved your case, looking so lonely as it wobbles towards you on the carousel, you walk through customs and someone reclaims you. The people with no one to reclaim them hurry past the embracing couples and are first in the queue for the taxis. As their cab pulls away, it drives past a row of cars with one half of a couple sat behind each steering wheel, waiting for the passenger seat to be filled.

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Most of all, you need someone to confer with. One of Lydia Davis's tips for getting better at writing dialogue is to listen to couples in public places having short conversations to arrive at a decision. She recommends airports and railway stations, where people are distracted and harassed, and unlikely to notice you listening in (Davis 2019).

After reading Davis's advice, I started hearing these conversations everywhere. A couple, I now saw, is a decision-making machine, a permanently open committee meeting where the 'any other business' goes on for ever. Couples discuss everything, as if they were one mind thinking aloud: whether or not to buy something in a shop, whether to get some lunch now or wait until later, whether to go out for dinner or get a takeaway or just make an omelette, whether something in the fridge smells a bit off, whether that paté will keep or should be chucked, how thinly you should slice those radishes, where the big plate goes in the cupboard, whose turn it is to drive, to walk the dog, to pick up the youngest child from kickboxing, or to go to the shops for that thing you both forgot. Just outside the men's changing rooms in Marks and Spencer there always seems to be the other half of a couple, ready to adjudge whether those jeans are too skinny or that jacket is meant to have that flappy bit at the back. In Tesco there is always a frayed-looking man on the phone in front of the chill cabinet, saying they haven't got sweet chilli houmous, will normal houmous do? This conversational to-and-fro is the small miracle of coupledom.

Am I idealising? Probably. I know that these conversations can be like icebergs, the tip of a submerged mass of frictions and evasions. On the acknowledgement pages of academic books, at the end of a long, obligatory list thanking colleagues, editors and grant-awarding bodies, there is usually a 'without whom' sentence. It is addressed to the significant other without whom the book would never have got done. *Pauline shared everything, as always. To Laura, who put up with me going on about it all. This book is dedicated to Stephen, and so am I.* Behind these touching sentences lies, presumably, a more complex story: years of delicate arbitration over childcare, household chores and weekends lost to writing. Most of coupledom is admin, because all of life is political. Phyllis Rose writes that a marriage typically fails not when erotic love blurs into affection, as it must, but when a couple no longer agree about the balance of power. Love, she writes, is 'the momentary or prolonged refusal to think of another person in terms of power' (Rose 1984, 8).

In coupledom, love and power, two inescapable forces in human life, are inseparably intertwined. The person we tussle with over these lopsided divisions of labour is the same person we need to witness and affirm our existence. We rely on them to at least feign interest in our work in the face of the world's indifference—and to convince us that it was not, after all, foolish to fill our finite time alive writing this 80,000-word book of finite interest to everyone else, retailing at £120 in hardback.

When you are not in a couple, you have no one to authenticate your life like this, no source of conversational closure. You must constantly calibrate and recalibrate how much another person might find your life interesting, how much you can fairly allow them to worry about you, how much pointless whingeing you can do in their presence. Part of me thinks that, with a couple, it's all priced in, prepaid, part of the contract. Unlimited calls, unlimited moaning. I'm sure it's not that simple. But I know this: moaning to a non-partner is always pay as you go. You have to keep topping up the bank of good will in case you need to draw on it.

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If doctors were to diagnose the disease of erotic love, the symptoms would always be the same and easy to spot, although infinitely harder to treat. The words 'I love you' are a cliché, uttered by billions now dead and billions yet to be born. A couple newly in love think that the world has lucidly revealed itself to them, that they have found the solution to life. If all goes well, though, and their union survives, they learn that life can't be solved; it can only get more beautifully complicated. Erotic love is an airy abstraction which convinces its sufferers that they can float above the confusion and mess of the world. Coupledom is concrete, the accumulation of specifics into a precarious whole. It starts with the blood and bones of animal desire and morphs into something more human, something half-felt and half-cultivated, born of the discovery that care means more when it is routinely given.

People have a fatal tendency to think, or at least hope, that they are perfectible and immortal. This tendency derives from our fear of facing two unbendable facts: the ordinariness of our lives and the inevitability of our deaths. Over time, though, the one we love might succeed in reining in our fantasies of mastery and control and bringing us back down to earth—to the reality of our lives as terrestrial, rhizomatic beings, rooted in and tangled up with the world, and constrained and sustained by each other. No, they remind us gently, you are neither invincible nor immortal. You are an earthling, stuck in the accommodations and compromises of the here and now—and your best bet is to hold on to this flawed and finite life that you share with me.

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There *are* stories about this kind of grounded, quotidian love if you look hard enough, and some of them are very old indeed. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is held captive on the island of Ogygia by Calypso. For seven years, he makes love to this beautiful, ageless goddess and then sits by the shore, staring out at the sea and sobbing. Finally, he goes to Calypso and confesses the truth. He misses his wife, Penelope, and longs to return to Ithaca. Calypso warns him that he will suffer greatly on the journey home, and for what? In the twenty years he has been away, his wife will have aged terribly. If he stays on the island, Calypso will make him immortal like her, releasing him for ever from time and death.

We already know what his choice will be, because we are human too. As soon as Calypso allows it, he sails away in search of his imperfect, mortal life, leaving behind the male fantasy of endlessly satisfied lust. The glue that binds Odysseus and Penelope together after twenty years' separation is what Odysseus wishes for Nausicaä, the young woman he meets on the island of Scheria, and her future spouse: *homophrosynê*, or like-mindedness.

Although Odysseus and Penelope are apart for most of *The Odyssey*, Homer signals *homophrosynê* between them through their parallel plotlines. Her skill and cunning as she fends off rival suitors at home echo Odysseus's as he steers his way home through many trials. When Odysseus finally arrives back in Ithaca disguised as a beggar, Penelope devises a test to confirm his identity. When he asks for a bed for the night, Penelope tells her servant to pull out the bed from her room and make it up for him. Odysseus is enraged that his bed has been moved. He tells Penelope what she knew along: he built the bed around an olive tree, with the trunk forming one of the bedposts. *Homophrosynê*, fed with the fuel of shared experience, allows a couple to see through each other's disguises. With Odysseus's identity verified, the couple retire to their immovable bed for the night—a night that the goddess Athena extends, restraining the rosy-fingered dawn beside the ocean. Odysseus's long journey thus ends, fittingly, in bed. *Im Bett ist alles Wett*, Germans say. Everything gets resolved there, with words and without them.

If a couple share a standard British double bed, 4 ft 6in wide, they will each have nine inches less space than a child in a standard single bed of 3 ft. Without even being aware of it, they will have worked out hundreds of little rules—about which side to sleep on, how much space to leave each other, how to stagger bedtimes so that someone can read with the light on or the non-snorer falls asleep first. As its mattress takes on the shape of its users, moulding and settling around where their shoulders and hips were, a double bed speaks the whole history of a relationship.

Athena doesn't restrain the dawn so that the reunited couple can make love, which they get over with quite quickly. She does it so that they can swap stories about what has happened to each of them in their years apart. Coupledom is founded, like all human life, on the telling of stories. A marriage, Rose argues, is 'a struggle for imaginative dominance' that 'set[s] two imaginations to work constructing narratives about experience presumed to be the same for both' (Rose 1984, 7, 6). Coupledom essentially consists of two stories that compete, overlap and blur into each other, but never quite merge. The two stories gradually intermesh over the years, so they come to read like one story, but aren't, not quite.

For Odysseus and Penelope, a single night stands in for twenty years' worth of the talk that, for thousands of years, couples have had at the end of each day—venting, offloading, fussing, bickering, gossiping, kvetching, listening, noticing. Through all this talk, they build a thick wall of secrets, in-jokes and arcana around themselves that no one else can breach. I have known couples who, by any rational calculation of the profits and losses of sticking together, should probably split up. They don't, I assume, because they are still building that wall; only when they stop will the relationship be doomed.

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Imagine this dual life, lived backwards. The story begins in a different kind of bed—a narrow, articulated one on wheels with side rails, surrounded by the apparatus of life prolongation: tubes, slow-release syringe pump, catheter, heart monitor. The healthy half is looking over the dying half, and finding it hard not to resent the tending nurses, who have more permission to touch the shallow-breathing body than they do. But then the dying half makes a miraculous recovery. The two resume their life of doing nothing together, all the while getting gradually younger. They make love with progressively greater frequency and progressively deteriorating expertise. The wall of stories they have built up by talking in bed for so many nights gets slowly dismantled, brick by brick, until they are near strangers to each other. Meanwhile, the fog of new love makes them think they know each other perfectly. The last page of the story begins with a chaste kiss, then a first, stilted conversation, then a shy, telling glance. And then they walk out of each other's lives for ever.

What would that back-to-front love story tell us about ourselves? Only that humans are a brave and resourceful species, betting the farm on this one version of the billions of lives we could have led. It is true that the couple norm is, like most forms of social life, a way of softly coercing us into an invented normality. It sets up a false binary, between couples and everyone else, that comes to define us, crowding out other ways to be. Still, that doesn't feel like quite the whole story. It leaves out the intricate particularity of a coupled life—the enveloping and thickening substance of it, its evolving texture and grain—and the horribly unstable ground on which that particularity rests. A couple is the smallest social grouping of all, what sociologists call a *dyad*, which makes it both the most intimate and the most fragile. If one member opts out, or dies, the group dies too.

Perhaps that is why even those resistant to the formalising of heteronormative conventions (including those who have until recently been legally excluded from those formalities) can still end up confirming their love in a church with witnesses, using language and gestures hundreds of years old, or choking back tears as they read words to each other off a card in anonymous-looking registry offices. Every couple is a social invention, but also a one-off, an anomaly, a dataset of one. And isn't throwing in our life's lot entirely with another person the most heroically foolhardy thing we ever do? Our life could have been something else, but it wasn't. Two people, who could have ended up with two other people, made this little world that became the centre of the universe, until those billions of unlived lives came to seem as unimaginable as stepping outside their own skin. That is what I think when I see all those couples out in public: thousands of love stories walking along in loose-fitting trousers, shapeless coats and sensible shoes, barely making eye contact with each other, but all of them, somehow and unarguably, a couple.

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