

Sir,

I'm an American recently posted to England by my firm. Should I start saying sorry for things that are clearly not my fault, pretending to be more useless than I really am? I want to fit in.

Todd, London

Of course you should start fucking apologising. What is it you imagine isn't your fault? It's all your bleeding fault. If you didn't start it you made it worse. And if you didn't make it worse you didn't sort it out. You want to know why you need to start apologising? Look at your letter. How did you start that? "I'm an American." You could have said, "I'm a bald accountant." "I'm a great shag." "I'm a power-walker." "I'm someone who cries at films, but only on my own." There are an infinite number of ways we can identify ourselves, a whole wide emotional world of possible self-worth and introduction: father, son, husband, friend, colleague . . . But you chose "American". You want to wear the national superpower hero suit? This is the first and most important thing you can think of saying about yourself? Well, fine. Then you can take on all the responsibility and accountability for all the fuck-ups and dumb shit that goes with it. They couldn't get Hillary Clinton to do the job so

we got you. If you want to fit in and have a good time perhaps you might consider rephrasing that. “Hi, I’m a visitor.” Or, “I’m new here.” Have a nice day.



Dear Sir,

Is there any way to choose paint with your wife without it descending into a row?

Simon, Kensington

I don't have a wife. I don't know who it is you've been arguing with. I did have a wife. If you're rucking with her about paint, good luck mate. You're in for a world of beige. With taupe accents. And don't even start on tiles.



Mr Gill,

I've been pretending to like football for years because it seemed the thing to do. Can I stop now?

Anon.

No. Not while you're still managing Chelsea.



Dear AA,

I haven't read a book since I left university in 1994. Am I missing out?

Alex, Northampton

I don't know. What else haven't you done since you left university? Had a whipped cream fight? Jumped off a bridge? Talked about French films for five hours? Slept with a friend and remained just friends? Been so happy to see your mates on a Friday night you thought you'd burst? Spent a whole term in a wife-beater trying to flick cards into a bin and smoke Gitanes at the same time? Woken up under a tree? Broken up over politics? You see, Alex, when people write about things they're not doing it's usually a symptom of a greater malaise, a deeper depression. If you want to know if you've missed out on reading books, go to a fucking bookshop and try a few. They won't mind, promise. If you left university in '94, my guess is you're just about hitting your 10,000-mile reality check. You're doing an inventory of what you've achieved. And comparing it with the to-do list you had when you turned 20. And it's a shock. There have been quite a lot of breakages. And pilfering. And it's way past its sell-by date. You either feel trapped or let down. And you realise it's not all still in front of you. It's not all

to play for. Half of it's already been used up. And you'll be lucky if you grab a draw. And the pattern for what the next 35 years is going to be like is already set. The horizon is closer, the panorama narrower, the goal smaller, the rewards prosaic. My guess is you didn't read a lot of books at university. And the degree you took was not much more than a label to get you three years of brilliant fun. And the further from it you get the more brilliantly it shines, and by contrast how much dimmer and more predictable your current life seems. But don't despair. There's an answer – it's not complicated. It's: suck in your gut and get on with it. This is the human condition. Live with it. In particular, it's the male human condition. When you were 20 you were a twat: insufferable, arrogant, thoughtless, boastful. You imagined all sorts of shit. You thought you'd be mates forever. You thought making money was about charm and being in the right place at the right time. You thought a plastic tube with a squeeze bulb would make your willy bigger and that being good in bed was a trick you did with your fingers, like shadow puppets. You thought England would win the World Cup before you were 30 and Salt-N-Pepa were the coolest hip-hop combo ever. So why should your post A-level wish list be any more reliable? The one thing you didn't have then was this paunch of self-pity. My advice is, whatever it is you think is holding you back or conspiring against you, embrace it. Do more of it. If it's responsibility you hate, take on more of it. If it's work, stay later. That's counterintuitive, but, trust me, without exception, the escape plans men make for themselves are all risible, pathetic, callow, selfish and destructive. Live with it.

This is what you're supposed to feel. This is being a man. Actually, on second thoughts, yes, you are missing out. Books, novels, are a great consolation. That's why they were invented, why they're written.



Mr Gill,

I've been told that flowers in pots aren't a socially acceptable gift, and that red roses are infra dig and carnations are common. I don't understand any of this, because I am common. I was brought up in a tower block in Sheffield. My mum was a dinner lady, my dad worked for the gas board. Flowers were for weddings and funerals. I'm very, very successful and very, very smart. The people I have to work and mix with seem to know this stuff genetically. Can you give me a quick guide? I know it doesn't matter but it sort of does.

Rick, London

I could tell you that the only acceptable roses are white or very faintly pink, but not salmon. And that long stems without thorns, in boxes, are laugh-out-loud embarrassing. And that all orchids are always hopelessly Thai Airways and that flowers mixed with vegetables are very passé and that tight balls of trimmed blooms in carefully complementary hues are so over. And never, ever send dried flowers or lilies with the stamens cut out or almost anything out of season. But contrarily, things that look like funeral decorations are bizarrely rather chic. And ideally cut flowers should look like they came from your garden and that your garden needs a tractor to drive round it and has a greenhouse the

size of a tennis court. And never hand over flowers. They must be delivered, but not by a flower shop. They should come instantly after the event you're being grateful or apologising for. That is, within eight hours, including weekends and bank holidays. I could tell you all that. But I'm not going to. Put it out of your mind. Cast it into the Pit of Forgotten. Because you're right. We don't have to be told this. We do know it genetically. And you will always get something wrong. The wrong card. The wrong ink. The wrong words. The wrong sign-off. There is no end to this stuff. It's like nuclear physics. You think you've found the smallest possible particle of snobbery but there's always something more negligibly, minutely irrational. And you're also right to say it doesn't matter. What does matter is that you're not quite successful enough. Give it a couple of years, propelled by your obvious Lawrentian resentment, you'll do better than all of them. And then when all of your friends are posh employees, you can give them what you like. Paper flowers, bags of gypsophilia seeds. They will love and respect you from the bottom of their prune-like hearts. And I promise you still won't feel any less uncomfortable and they won't feel a scintilla less entitled.



Dear Sir,

Matching his and hers tattoos: ever acceptable?

Winston, Manchester

Only if you're Danish bacon.



AA,

My fiancé's from Glasgow. He's insisting on getting married in a kilt. I'm from Utah. My family are very conservative and religious. They're not going to understand. How can I get him into trousers without hurting his ethnic feelings?

Mary-Beth, by email

Ethnic feelings? He's from fucking Glasgow, for Christ's sake. The kilt is the least of your worries. Even when they find out what he's not got on underneath, and they surely will, wait till your parents get a load of the in-laws and his childhood mates. The reception is going to be fabulous. Are you writing this up as a film treatment? If not, do you mind if I have it? PS, do you seat your mothers by height or age?



Dear Sir,

When, if ever, is it permissible for a man to sign off a text with “love” or “x”? And don’t say “best” is best, because it isn’t. Nor “yours” nor “faithfully” nor “peace”.

Love Derek x

Darling, sweetheart, cupcake. It’s permissible, as you sweetly put it, to sign texts any damn way you like. You’re all so bloody fond of the internet and you bang on and on about messaging and techno and plugged-in stuff, and you say it’s all about freedom and honesty, and the day after you get a Twitter account you’re all constipated about the raised-pinkie etiquette of how to say “cheerio”, and all the rest of the manners business and the after-you niceties. You sound like my grandparents. Why do you care? Why do you want to start making up rules and laws and a smirking snobbery about something you say is pristine, anarchic and lawless, and naked? If it’s any help, Alexander Graham Bell suggested that you answered his implement with a firm and clear, “Ahoy”. So why not start with that? And why don’t you finish with . . .



Dear AA Gill,

My wife and I went on holiday with her family. Her younger sister came down to the pool wearing a tiny bikini. "Ooh," I said, "that's one for the wank bank." I wasn't really sure if I said it out loud. The wife went tonto. "Did you just say you wanted to masturbate over my sister?" I tried to explain the harmless concept of the wank bank, that all men have one. But she won't let it go. She has to know who else is in it, and if she's there. And every time we go to a restaurant or a pub she says, "I suppose she's a deposit in your savings account." And now she's asking her friends if their husbands have them, and the guys are complaining to me. But the worst bit is, I'm experiencing difficulties taking Captain Picard to warp speed. Where there should be Angelina Jolie in leather or Halle Berry in sweat, I can only see the wife, wagging her finger and shouting, "I hope that's not my sister in there with you!"

Phil, by email

There is a wank-banking crisis. We all speculated and spent, in the biblical sense – borrowed from one ball to pay to the other – on fantasies of body parts we can't sustain, or pay the interest. The 21st-century wank bank is full of arses and tits we don't need, and we'll never use. It looks like your iTunes library but without the sense of rhythm or a

Genius button. And does it make us happy, all this ejaculatory aspiration? No, it doesn't. Tell the wife she's right. In these straitened times you can't afford a big, fuck-off-I'm-busy wank bank. So you're laying them all off except for a couple of tasteful classical statues and that memory of her with the sunburn and the drunken Brazilian on honeymoon, and that from now on you're placing yourself in her hands or outsourcing to the internet.



*Mr Gill,
I'm frightened.*

Anonymous, by email

And so you should be. Frightened is the natural state for all men. There is much to be frightened about and of. What's more frightening is you don't know the half of it. The measure of a man's life is how he copes with the terrible wall of fear. The traditional manly remedies are: rigorous self-delusion (an absolute refusal to face anything remotely akin to reality or even open an envelope); drink; and mood-altering masturbation. And for this you need a really comprehensive wank bank.



Sir,

My husband said he had something important to tell me. I could see from the fear it was serious. I'd suspected for some time that he might have been wearing my clothes, so I was prepared for a bout of tearful trannie guilt. Which, frankly, I'd be OK with. We're about the same size and I didn't marry him for his dress sense, so I might as well stay married to him for mine. But then he blurted out that he was a nudist. I must say I was surprised. Calmly, I said I thought I might have noticed if he'd been playing volleyball in the garden starkers. He said he didn't want to be a collective nudist – he was a singular, secret one. And he would like me to be a secret nudist with him. What, just round the house? No, he said. Outside, together. Well I wasn't overcome with excitement, but compromise is everything in a relationship, and after 20 years of marriage I was amazed that there was anything new to discover about him. I'm going to draw a veil over our sojourn in Hampstead Heath. If only I'd had a veil about me at the time. Never again. He said the deeply humiliating cascade of events was my fault for not being quick enough. He is still sulking. And he says he doesn't know if we can go on if I can't join him on his journey. At the moment I don't know if I can go on if I do. It does seem a very stupid reason to break up what is essentially a happy though dull life with a nice home, a successful business and a secure family.

Sophie, West Sussex

He is not a nudist. Nudists are plural. A singular nudist is a flasher. He wants to implicate you in his sad little wagging insecurity. If he gets nicked on his own it's six months on the nonce's wing and a lifetime on the register. If he's got you with him it's a Benny Hill sketch, and the bobbies trying to keep a straight face while giving you a lift home in a blanket, with a verbal to lay off the Viagra and go on holiday to Sweden. But you're right not to want to break up a perfectly dull marriage. It's not that serious. It's not as if he suggested bridge, or restoring classic caravans. The answer is, introduce him to your nearest art school as a model. He can be naked alone and observed. And you could take up sketching, and thus join in while remaining clothed. Indeed, you sound like someone who might take to bohemian headscarves, smocks, lumpy jewellery and cannabis. And you can't be any worse at art than he is at being a pervert.



Dear Mr Gill,

My husband has a degenerative, incurable illness. We're both young, under 30. We met at school and have been together since GCSE geography. Now he wants to die and he wants me to help him and assumes I will because we love each other. He says I won't get into trouble with the police, and courts are sympathetic to spouses who assist in suicides – particularly after Terry Pratchett – and anyway I have no ulterior motive. He's saying goodbye to all his friends and making arrangements for the big day: drugs, suffocation and Billie Holiday. He's happier than he's been for ages. The thing is, I do have an ulterior motive. I'm sleeping with his younger brother. And have been for years. In fact, I was on the point of leaving when he got diagnosed, but then I couldn't. I've just discovered I'm pregnant and obviously it can't be my husband's. Oh, and there's one other thing. It doesn't really matter but my husband's father has a title. If he dies it will pass to his brother. And he'll inherit a great deal of land. I do think killing him is the best option. I have no problems either way, morally.

Jocasta, London SW3

Congratulations. Hats off. Respect. You can be in this business for years without getting a problem that impressively screwed up. Where did you all go to school? Webster's

Academy of Jacobean Tragedy? OK, here's the thing: you're completely fucked. No, really. Game over. There is just one teeny, forlorn chink of hope, an outside, 100–1 chance. So here is your mission, if you choose to accept it. First you've got to tell the husband that he's going to be a father. Explain the immaculate conception by telling him you judiciously had some of the hereditary custard frozen, way back, just in case. And you've secretly been having IVF. You didn't tell him because you didn't want him to be disappointed if it didn't work. So he has to stay alive to see his son. You have to square the brother, carrot and stick. First, keep shagging him, which shouldn't be a hardship. But tell him if he says anything you'll deny it and no one will believe him because he's a younger son, and no one ever believes younger sons. So this way you keep everything, including someone else's good name. But, and there is a but, the child will grow to be an amoral, manipulative, sensual monster. The two of you will be well-suited until you get old and the last thing you'll see is his beautiful smile as he gently but firmly holds a pillow embroidered with the family crest over your face.



Sir,

I've just left uni and have got a lot of job interviews lined up. City, industry, etc. I'm really clever. My CV's impressive. I'm sure I could do most jobs better than most people but I'm shit at interviews. When someone asks me what my chief fault is, I have an uncontrollable desire to say, "I smile when listening to idiots." And then smile.

Gareth, via Facebook

OK, Gareth. First, remember this is all about the job. It's not just about *your* job. It's all to do with the jobs of the people who are interviewing you. Being on a recruitment panel represents a lot of stress and an opportunity for people in offices. They get to show off or get shown up. There will be one boss-person and then two underling suits, who will be trying to outdo each other. What they're looking for is someone who makes them look good, and who won't be a threat. So the trick to interviews is not the dos, but the three don'ts. Don't flirt, don't be too keen and don't be too clever. Remember, the job will always go to the third best candidate. First and second best will be championed by the competing courtiers. The boss will say, "Is there anyone we can all agree on?" And that'll be third best. Which is never going

to be you, is it? Because the other thing is, you're a twat. A proper, whiny, pompous, self-justifying twat. I hope *The Big Issue* thing works out for you.

