Okay, so you know you’ve been messed up by Hollywood. You realize you haven’t given marriage a fair shake and suspect you’ve left the rational, realistic, and serious pursuit of a spouse on the back burner. Instead, you’ve waited for your Ideal List Man or Ideal List Woman to show up, but he or she hasn’t and you’re still single.

No biggie. All that’s left to do is watch a little less TV and sign up for a marriage class at church, right? Surely that’ll do the trick?

Not so fast.

Sorry to disappoint, but while getting our heads out of Hollywood is a great start, there are actually bigger and sneakier traps we’ve fallen into when it comes to finding love. And—get
this—some of them are being perpetuated by (gasp!) the churches we attend and the Christian circles we run in. Yeah, I said it.

In fact, I’m going to say right here that after years of hearing lame-o dating stories (and even more lame-o breakup stories) coupled with the collective whining of the tragically lovelorn, I’ve come up with what I feel are the five biggest reasons most of us have dysfunctional, directionless, or flat-out DOA love lives.

While not an exhaustive list by any means, these are the biggies—the ones that trip us up over and over again. These are the ones that are keeping us single. And lest you think I sit on my high horse and wag a finger, let me assure you, I’ve been guilty of all five. Some at the same time, even. So much for moral superiority.

So here we go. The five reasons your love life is a disaster (or doesn’t exist).

**REASON NUMBER ONE: YOU’RE WAITING FOR “THE ONE”**

Two-thirds of Americans believe in soul mates or this concept of “the One.”¹ This is the idea that there’s one ideal match for you in the world, and he or she is “out there” somewhere. It’s the person you’re most compatible with, who’ll complete you, and who has been reserved (by God, fate, or the universe, depending on your worldview) exclusively for you.

The problem is, we have a bunch of people expecting a soul mate, but we have a lifetime divorce risk of more than 40 percent (thankfully mitigated by a number of factors, including faith, so don’t despair). So if we believe in soul mates but are ditching our
marriages, what gives? Why don’t the numbers add up? Are we really that bad at picking the supposed loves of our lives?

Personally, I think the idea of the One is completely bogus. It’s neither biblical nor practical. And it sets us up for one of two huge potential failures. Let me explain.

On the one hand, waiting for the One leads to relationship paralysis, because how can a person be sure? If that girl is great, but so is this one and so is the one over there, how do you choose? What too many end up doing is not choosing at all. They wait and wait, either for every possible fact and assurance or for an unmistakable gut feeling or a sign. If they’re not satisfied with what they’re seeing or feeling, they wait. They continue to search or to dabble in relationships or to hold on to a relationship, hoping they’ll get the necessary confidence to move ahead. It may never come.

On the other hand, some fall in love, completely intoxicated by the overwhelming amazingness of those they fall in love with. They rush into marriage, each certain they’ve found the One. This is who I’ve been waiting for! It doesn’t get better than this! But at the first bump in the road, that first unwelcome interruption to marital bliss, they pause.

This shouldn’t be happening. Isn’t this why I made sure to marry my soul mate? And by marrying one’s soul mate, doesn’t that practically guarantee a problem-free marriage? After all, This person should understand me. Shoot, he or she should read my mind. But now we’re fighting. We’re seeing things we didn’t see before. To be honest, I don’t like this person at all right now. Did I make a mistake? Did I not marry my soul mate after all? This isn’t working, so the only solution is to start over. Because the One is out there, and I need to find him or her.
And so they divorce and look for greener pastures. Another marriage becomes a casualty. A statistic.

My friend Motte was looking for the One. In the meantime, he was hanging out with Beth. He and Beth went to church together and were in the same line of work. He enjoyed Beth’s company and thought she was attractive. She also had a number of other great qualities. In fact, if he were honest, he would say she was marriage material.

But was she the One?

He took her out a few times and even toyed with the idea of getting serious, but he didn’t want to commit. He didn’t want to make a mistake. Finally, an older man whom he greatly respected approached him with a question. “What’s going on with Beth?” he asked. Taken aback, Motte wasn’t sure how to answer. He felt a little defensive, quite frankly. The man was undeterred.

“You need to figure out what you’re doing,” he continued. “Are you dating her or not? Because if you’re not dating her and this is going nowhere, you’re wasting her time. If that’s the case, you need to let her go.” In effect, he told him to fish or cut bait. In other words, Motte needed to pursue Beth with intention or free her to be pursued by someone else—someone who was serious, about her heart and about marriage.

I remember Motte telling me what happened. It was as if in that moment he saw everything clearly, that it was time to choose. Because while there were many wonderful women in his acquaintance, Beth was everything he could ask for, and she was right in front of him. This was a woman he could build his life with.

“I pursued her for marriage,” Motte said, “and I didn’t look back. The day I married Beth, she became the One. All my other options
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were eliminated. Now I can spend the rest of my life knowing that she’s the one I invest in, the one I love, the one I serve, the one I’ll grow old with.”

You may be in a similar situation. That girl from church is great, but so is your sister’s roommate. And there’s the girl you just met. She seems cool. But that girl over there plays guitar. You love the guitar!

Stop the craziness. Know that there are a number of women in the world (we don’t know how many, but let’s conservatively say hundreds and hundreds) whom you can be attracted to, love, live with, serve with, share a calling with, start a family with, and honor God with.

This should be very freeing. You don’t need to find the One. You just need to find one. Of many. And once you cut the clutter, focus on what’s important (we’ll get to that), and choose, you’ll be on your way to a marriage that makes sense and ultimately makes a difference. You’ll find your one.

Reason Number Two: You’re Still a Kid

A while back, I met a guy online. He lived in another state, but I was in a season of attempting to make most relationships work, so I figured a few thousand miles was no obstacle to true love.

This guy was funny. He was verbally quick, witty, and quite smart. He was also cool. Nothing ruffled him. I was smitten. We emailed, texted, and eventually started talking on the phone. As I got to know him, I learned a few things about him. He loved routine. He ran the same route every morning, ate one of two things
for breakfast every day, played basketball with the same guys in the same gym, frequented the same takeout joints, and kept the same schedule as best he could. He was stable, as far as I could tell. That’s good, right?

But all that stability started to irk me. Not because I thought he should be some sort of reckless madman, but because in everything he did, he took the safe road. He was good at his job. But when I asked him about a promotion that was available and I thought he could easily get, he demurred. He said he liked his current position and didn’t want more responsibility. When he shared a dream of seeing new places, I asked him about a move. No, he didn’t want to uproot. He liked his small apartment and didn’t want to lose it.

Shockingly, this guy eventually decided to travel to Colorado to meet me. For all his laid-back coolness, spending time together revealed a few more things. Like, he didn’t want to pay for a hotel room, so I asked one of my pastors if he and his wife would open up their spare room. They did. He stayed for about four days, and (I’m still ashamed every time I say this) with the exception of a couple of Starbucks runs, I paid for pretty much everything we did.

Sure, I’m at fault for letting it happen. But c’mon. After building this guy up in my head, I was stunned to see the way things played out. I couldn’t believe it, quite frankly. One night, we decided to go out for dinner. I asked him what he was in the mood for, and he responded, “I don’t know. Do you have a gift card for anyplace?”

Folks, I’m not making this up. The sad thing is, I did have a gift card to a local restaurant, and after dinner, I presented it. You think that’s bad? Well, I also paid the difference—the remainder of
the bill, tip and all. I was so embarrassed and confused, I didn’t know what else to do.

Needless to say, that relationship didn’t work out, but in reflecting on it, other red flags abounded, flags I had previously ignored—like this dude’s pride in his fifty-seven-inch TV, despite his cheapskate tendencies elsewhere. Or his three boxes of Count Chocula. Oh, and maybe that he could actually tell the difference between Count Chocula, Cocoa Krispies, and Cocoa Puffs. Or the fact that he dropped $120 on jeans for the trip to see me and made a point of telling me. Maybe that’s why he couldn’t afford dinner or a hotel room.

Some people need to grow up.

Look, no one wants to date a kid. Maybe you’re still figuring life out. Or you don’t have a job. Or you’re a daddy’s girl who can’t let go. Or you call your parents the minute you have a question or can’t figure something out. Or you’re foolish and immature; you tell dumb jokes, make fun of others, and waste time on frivolous pursuits. If this is you, it’s time to put your big boy (or girl) pants on. And don’t think you’re fooling anyone. In an age of social media frenzy, all anyone has to do is check your Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram feed to see what you’re up to. Is it mostly dumb stuff? Are you retweeting Jimmy Fallon’s jokes or stupid pet videos? Is your entire life told in Bitstrips? Then it’s time to get a different script.

It used to be that you finished school, got a job, and got married. Now young adults are prolonging adolescence (another cultural fabrication that’s pretty recent) well into their twenties. They’re using the time to go to school, go to more school, travel, work part-time jobs, fret about their lack of an awesome (read: easy and high-paying)
job, find themselves, move out of and then back into their parents’
houses, rack up debt, and be generally directionless and despondent.

I was there. I spent a chunk of my twenties floating between a few
stellar opportunities—freelance work and solid entry-level jobs—and
the tricky and sometimes discouraging world of temporary employ-
ment. While a temp, I did everything from office work to counting
lasagna noodles to handing out pizza samples, all the while pining after
my dream job and lamenting my liberal arts education. I lived with my
parents and sulked.

When you’re sulking, it’s hard to get your eyes off yourself. It’s
hard to see the future and all its possibilities. Some days it’s even hard
to get out of bed. But it must be done. It’s part of growing up.

So if your friends are dragging you down, maybe it’s time to get
new friends. If you’re still in school, it’s time to pick a major and see it
through. If you’re looking at careers, it’s time to get some solid intern-
ships, show up on time (actually, show up before everyone else), and be
a self-starter. Ask questions. Seize opportunities. Take an interest in the
real world, and get unstuck. You’ll be glad you did. You’ll set yourself
apart from many of your peers. And you may actually get a date.

Oh, and lest you think people who are responsible and mature
are also boring, let me tell you this: I never met a take-charge, ma-
ture, and compassionate single dude who didn’t make me look twice
at him. Maybe it’s time we took this whole idea of “hotness” back
and made it about more than a shallow and oversexed standard of
attraction. Because you know what? Maturity is hot. Forget what all
the rappers, teen idols, and baby daddies say. Some things never go
out of style.

Having and keeping a job? Hot.
Respecting women? Hot.
Fighting for those who can’t fight for themselves? Superhot.
Knowing and living out the Gospel? Megahot.

And, ladies, we have unique gifts too. Most of us are natural connectors and nurturers. We’re good at listening, relating, and empathizing. So maybe it’s time for us to stop caring more about the contestants on *The Bachelor* than we do about the people around us. It’s time to stop gossiping and speaking nonsense and use our words to build others up.

Encouraging a friend? Hot.
Loving the elderly? Hot.
Being creative and serving joyfully? Way hot.
Speaking truth and knowing when to keep our mouths shut? Uberhot.

Friends, let’s grow up.

**REASON NUMBER THREE: YOU’RE NOT DATING**

I was in Walmart looking for a birthday card. After a few minutes of scouring the racks for a funny-but-not-raunchy one (and avoiding the musical ones; those drive me nuts), a guy about my age appeared in my peripheral vision.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a card for my mom and wondered if you’d help me pick one out. I’m not totally sure what she’d like, and I want to find something special.”

Awww.

That was pretty much my reaction. This sweet guy was doing his best to find a card for his mom! What a wonderful son! Of course
I would help him find a card! Did he want me to help him find a gift—or a special song or flowers or a timeshare in Florida—for her too? Because I would.

No, he just wanted a card.

Okay, easy enough. We read card after card until we found what he thought was the perfect one. I smiled and turned to leave.

“Hey, how about getting dinner?”

Oh. Snap.

Ladies, that is what you call smooth. Now, I don’t know if the whole thing was contrived from the get-go, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that this guy had game. He got me hooked with the mom-card story, and after a suitable (though short) amount of time, he made his move. It was made so effortlessly, so naturally, I didn’t see it coming.

On the other hand, I know guys who have pined after girls for years without ever asking them out.

Why the difference? Some of it is the ratio of risk to payoff. Walmart guy may have been truly interested in me, or he could’ve just been after a booty call. I’ll never know (I panicked and turned him down). But the “ask” was spontaneous and cavalier. He didn’t know me, so he really had nothing to lose. The pining guys, on the other hand, have built futures in their minds with their girls of choice. They’ve put everything into their dreams until the dreams are too big to risk. So they hang back, cling to the dreams, and do nothing.

There has to be a balance. On one hand, you don’t want to adopt a player mentality, treating girls like conquests and asking out every one that crosses your path. But you don’t need FBI files on the girls that interest you, either. You can observe, analyze, even hang around
and be friends with a girl you like for only so long. Eventually you have to ask her out, or you’ll get nowhere.

As I travel around and ask young adults to define dating, fewer and fewer can do it. It’s almost foreign to them. What they are familiar with—and are settling for—is hanging out and hooking up.

Both hanging out (spending undetermined amounts of time with undefined groups of people of varying size) and hooking up (having “no strings attached” sex with a partner you may or may not know) are cheap forms of relationship that many young adults try to pass for dating. But they’re not. They’re both really just forms of using people, whether for pleasure or companionship.

Hooking up is never okay. Just look at STD rates, abortion rates, and emotional and attachment disorders to see that. Oh, and don’t forget the Bible’s perfect script for sex and relationship. Hanging out is appropriate for certain levels and stages of friendship. But it’s not dating. It’s not going to get you into a committed relationship that goes the distance.

In Christian circles, we tend to err on the side of not dating. Guys don’t ask girls out for a number of reasons. Some are still being boys. They’re caught up with their toys, their friends (buds, bros, homies), and their hobbies. They’re not even in the spheres of mature, eligible women. That’s probably for the best. Boys shouldn’t be dating.

Others are scared. They don’t want to fail. They don’t want to be the guy who asks girls out but gets rejected. And rejected. And rejected.

Still others treat dating as if it were a sequel to Mission: Impossible. They don’t want to show their hand, so they do a lot of vague reconnaissance, fact-finding, and second-guessing. They get into a girl’s
circle, and in an unobtrusive, completely risk-free way, they try to scope her out. But the next thing they know, she’s coming to them to get advice about dating another guy—the guy who actually asked her out. Meanwhile, Mr. Stealth has been friend-zoned. And it’s very difficult to get out of the Friend Zone.

Where we got the idea that we have to know everything about a person before dating him or her, I have no idea. Folks, that’s the point of dating—to get to know someone! These days it seems you have to practically be betrothed to be seen doing coffee with someone of the opposite sex. Good grief, it’s a huge drama fest. I’ve had girls from Christian colleges—attractive, smart, and friendly girls—come up to me in tears saying they’ve never been on a date, and they’re about to graduate. Now that I think of it, I’ve had thirty-year-old girls say the same thing.

Guys, I believe the power to ask a girl out is in your hands. It’s a great act of leadership and service at the same time. Don’t worry about whether she’ll misinterpret a date as a marriage proposal. If she goes home and writes her name with your last name, it’s not the end of the world. If she picks out china patterns or tells her girlfriends how wonderful you are, consider it a compliment. You’ll survive. You went on a date. You’re a step ahead of most of your buddies.

That said, ladies, stop writing your name with guys’ names. Don’t pick out china patterns. Stop debriefing a coffee date as if it’s Watergate or an episode of 24. Do yourself a favor and be normal, for crying out loud.

While we’re at it, let’s talk about why you don’t date. Yes, one reason is you’re not being asked out. We covered that. But some of you are unnecessarily turning guys down.
Some of you are too attached to the fifty-point list you, like me, created in junior high. If a guy doesn’t measure up to the list, you turn him down. Some of you have put arbitrary requirements on men, be they vague levels of spirituality and what that should look like, the type of job they should have, or their correct use of grammar and punctuation—one transgression and he’s banished from the realm of possibility. Or you’ve already labeled a guy as “weird” based on what you’ve observed or the gossip you’ve heard.

You also may not be dating because you’re “one of the guys.” It’s the female version of being friend-zoned, and it’s not fun. I used to be there. I was always debating guys and trying to one-up them. I used my humor to cut them down. I refused to show emotion. I acted as though I knew everything. I never asked for help. And I stood by as the guys I liked asked other girls—the warm, kind, interesting girls who weren’t afraid to be girls—out on dates.

Let me summarize by saying a few things. For starters, here is something not often said that should be very freeing: guys are under no obligation to ask girls out, and girls are under no obligation to accept. Get it? There’s power in both camps, and that’s okay. Dating isn’t a science; it’s a dance. It’s a mystery that involves risk, chance, and a fair share of sweaty palms.

That said, it’s only dating. You’re not marrying anyone—yet. If you’re only going to ask out or accept the person who makes your heart instantly race, you’re going to eliminate a big pool of potential candidates.

I’m a big fan of giving chances. No, I’m not saying give everyone a chance. If the person terrifies you, don’t go out with him (or her). But if it’s someone with a good reputation who loves Jesus, is of good
character, and is in your acquaintance, you may be surprised what you learn. Don’t rely on fireworks, a feeling, or the need to know everything about the person beforehand. Don’t get paralyzed by all the potential what-ifs of a relationship. Because guess what—you’re not in a relationship.

My mom has been in an assisted living facility for about a year now. She’s already had two or three of the elderly men there interested in her, and they haven’t been afraid to show it. I was lamenting to her that her dating potential is better than mine, and she replied, “Oh, I’m not going to date any of them. I don’t want things to get messy.”

Get messy. Start dating.

**REASON NUMBER FOUR: YOUR DATING IS DIRECTIONLESS**

So you’re in a relationship. Or at least you’re pretty sure you are. He calls you his girlfriend, or at the very least you go out one-on-one pretty often and he (usually) pays. And you hold hands.

For now, let’s call that dating.

So what’s your plan? Where do things stand?

*Um, what?*

Yeah, you heard what I said. Where is this thing *going*?

Therein lies the problem.

There are a lot of you who by definition are dating, but rather than being a means to an end, your dating life is more of a holding pattern—something you define yourself with now but can’t explain in future terms.
You’re stuck and you don’t know it.

Not that dating isn’t great in itself; it is. It’s a lot of fun and can be downright exhilarating with the right person. But having fun isn’t the final goal. Neither is creating history and memories, keeping one another accountable, maturing one or both parties, or practicing communication and commitment.

The purpose of dating is to find a suitable marriage partner. Period. You’ll have fun in the process, and yes, you’ll grow (and hopefully your boyfriend or girlfriend will too), but in dating there is something to accomplish. And it’s not to be treated flippantly or casually.

Again, we see extremes in this area. On one hand, the dating couple is approaching their relationship with primarily fun in mind. It’s a wait-and-see attitude that elevates the thrill of dating, of belonging to someone, and of always having someone to bring to a friend’s wedding or the company Christmas party. This dating is recreational. It’s pizza nights, Saturday hikes, designated ringtones and text chimes, and even the occasional vacation or missions trip. It’s birthday parties, endless text trails, and nauseatingly cute pet names like Boo and Baby.

But nothing’s defined. There’s no game plan, only the promise of hanging in there while things stay fun and carefree. You’re checking each other out, letting the chips fall where they may. Eventually, one person gets frustrated with the inertia and tries to change the plan. This may or may not work. Worse, neither person addresses the inertia and the relationship dies, usually after a significant amount of time.

Remember the Count Chocula guy? The one who played it safe and paid for next to nothing? His previous relationship—the one he was in prior to meeting me—lasted nine years.
Nine years.

As he described it, the relationship had intense seasons, and he and his girlfriend knew pretty much everything about one another (well, duh), but in the end, without direction or purpose, it fizzled out. He told me that after nine years, he and his girlfriend met in a coffee shop, sat across a table from one another, said “It’s over,” and parted ways.

How incredibly sad. And how disappointing to look back and realize that there’s a decade of their lives (and marriageable years) they’ll never get back. But it happens all too often. Has it happened to you?

On the other hand, you have the couple who’s doing more than recreational dating. They’re into each other and really want to see something work out. They hope (maybe without saying anything; they don’t want to jinx it) that this will end in marriage. So they’ll do everything they can to test the waters.

They study each other and share intimate details from their pasts, as well as their likes, dislikes, hopes, and dreams. They spend every minute together. They fight and make up, then fight again. They’re accountability partners. They’re practically members of each other’s families, even celebrating holidays in each other’s homes. In short, they’re pretty much married—they certainly act like it. Their lives are totally enmeshed. But they have nothing to show for it. It’s not real. They’re playing house.

Both cases above become even more serious when you factor in the physical. How hard is it to be into someone and dating him or her exclusively, with little to no structure, yet hold to a biblical view of sex and purity? I’ll answer for you; it’s pretty difficult.
This is why we see people dating for three, four, or five years (or nine), and we’re not surprised to learn that they’re sleeping together and/or living together. It’s inevitable, isn’t it?

We think we’re going to navigate a relationship with virtually no plan, no boundaries, no accountability, and no objectivity and escape unscathed? Hardly.

But don’t you need to know what you’re getting into? Don’t you need to learn everything you can about this person, especially if you’re hitching your wagon to theirs for life?

Not really. There are some big things you need to learn, yes. We’ll get into that later. But the idea that you need to practice life with this person is wrong. The idea that you need to test him or her out sexually is wrong.

Cohabitation is so bogus. Take the Bible out of the equation, and experts still agree that there are absolutely no benefits to living together before marriage. In fact, living together is actually worse for long-term marriage stability and happiness.

Couples who live together before tying the knot do not get to marriage faster. In fact, living together acts as a major de-motivator to marriage, especially for men (hello, milk/cow). Plus, those who cohabit have higher rates of divorce once (if) they do marry. They also have higher rates of domestic violence in the relationship, more disparity among who does chores and takes responsibility in the relationship, and less commitment to the relationship in general.²

Finally, living together keeps people in bad relationships longer. It’s almost like the frog-kettle scenario: they’ve paddled in the same pot for so long they don’t notice the steam rising out of the warming, and now boiling, water.
She may see that the relationship is not ideal. In fact, she and her boyfriend have a lot of problems that seem to be getting worse, not better. But they share rent. And they bought those rugs, dishes, and houseplants together. And now they have a dog. It’s just too difficult to leave now.

And so it goes.

Friends, don’t date without a plan, a purpose, and a goal. Dating for any other reason than marriage sets you up for failure. You’ll compromise purity by having connection (and hormones) without commitment. You’ll frustrate each other by having differing expectations at different points of the relationship. And you’ll waste some (maybe many) of your marriageable years by clinging to a relationship that is exclusive but has no guarantees.

By the way, everything I’ve said above is also why I’m not a fan of teens dating. Who thinks a sixteen-year-old should be in an exclusive romantic relationship with no power to act on the feelings, assumptions, and connections made? It’s just silly.

We’ll assume that most of you reading this are out of your teens and in a position to marry (and thus in a position to be dating), but if you’re dating with no direction, you’re no better off than the high schooler who’s preparing for prom.

**REASON NUMBER FIVE: YOU’RE STUCK IN A FRIENDLATIONSHIP**

It goes something like this:

Ben and Ashley are friends. Maybe they met at school or church, in their singles group or small group, or at a party. They struck up a
conversation, joined in a few group activities, had fun, and decided to stay in touch.

As friends, they hang out. They hang out a lot. Eventually Ashley starts like-liking Ben. She doesn’t know how it happened, or when, but it happened. Now he’s all she can think about, and she starts hoping for more.

Meanwhile, Ashley and Ben are becoming best friends. They do a lot together: dinners out, movies, game nights, long talks on the phone, texting throughout the day. They have inside jokes, non-verbal cues, and, when it matters, each other’s back.

Ashley’s starting to wonder when things are going to change. After all, it’s pretty obvious that Ben loves being with her. He calls her at unexpected times, brightens her day with a joke—even brings her a latte (extra hot, no foam) at work when she’s having a tough day. Ashley knows Ben wants to be married someday; he’s said so. And she’s started bringing up the subject more and more. She even made Ben look at engagement rings (“just for fun”) on their last trip to the mall.

How long will it take Ben to make a move? When will he wake up and realize what he has right in front of him? Surely he’s seen every romantic comedy from the 1980s where that exact thing happened?

Ashley decides to bide her time. After all, she can’t give Ben up now. She loves him. And she knows he’s the One. They’re meant to be; he just doesn’t know it yet. She turns their usual hangouts at her apartment into an opportunity to cook Ben’s favorite meals and show off her decorating skills (the new throw pillows and coffee table were expensive, but men love a cozy home). He notices, and she offers to decorate his apartment, which he accepts.
One night after dinner, before Ashley pops in the Redbox DVD that Ben brought over, Ben says he needs Ashley’s advice.

“Of course,” she answers. “Anything.”

“I’m wondering what you think of Kate. The new girl at church.”

“What about her?”

“Well, I think I’m going to ask her out.”

Ashley, dear readers, is in a friendlationship.

By this time, Ashley is either faking calm or bursting into tears. She’s rationally beginning to assess (read: subtly or not-so-subtly tear down) Kate’s merits verbally, or she’s throwing Ben out of her apartment. I’ve seen both.

Poor Ashley. What a mess, and she didn’t see it coming. Most don’t. And guys, you’re not immune to this. I know many men who’ve fallen victim to a friendlationship—being a girl’s confidant, buddy, fix-it man, rescuer, comforter, chauffeur, and more—all because he hoped to win over a heart that had little chance of being won. Guys too often play the role of honorary girlfriend, letting women use them, abuse them, and toss them aside when the guy they really want comes calling.

So what about Ashley and Ben? She confronted him, of course, wondering how and when this whole Kate thing came about and how could he be interested in Kate after meeting her once—maybe twice—and for that matter (the volume escalates here), what would he call what he and Ashley were doing the past year and a half?

Friendship, of course.

“What? Ashley, we’re just friends.”

Just friends.
There’s fault on both sides here. Ben’s at fault for singling Ashley out—even in friendship—and building connection with her that he had no intention of making good on. He wasn’t planning a future with her. He wasn’t even evaluating her as potential spouse material. Nope, he was using her for companionship now.

But Ashley let it happen. She gave freely—too freely—of her time, attention, affection, energy, and resources to a relationship that had no definition, no understanding, and no protection for her quite-fragile heart. She settled for scraps in hopes that she would someday be invited to the table. Sadly, many do this, even giving sex as a means of securing a guy or girl. It doesn’t work.

I had a friend who did this. She lived Ashley’s story for seven years. At the end of the seven years, she realized two things: first, her relationship with this guy had become an idol; second, it wasn’t going anywhere.

Saddened but resolute, my friend sat down with this dude and broke up from a seven-year non-relationship. He, of course, threw up his hands and denied the time and intimacy that had been shared.

My friend went home and sobbed for days. It was like a divorce, and rightly so. She’d given a lot—too much—and after almost a decade of investment had walked away empty-handed. What she lost was a span of seven years—prime dating years—gone because she was fixated on a guy who never intended to pursue her. She will never get those years back.

This doesn’t have to be you. How can you safeguard against the friendlationship? Start by taking to heart all the advice I’ve given so far. Have a realistic yet hopeful view of marriage, an understanding of what dating is, and a game plan for getting there.
It also helps to know your worth. God created you for a reason and it was good. He doesn’t intend for you to drift in and out of go-nowhere relationships. If he has marriage in your future, it will be to a guy who knows you’re worth pursuing or a girl who sees your value as pursuer. If he’s not scrambling to treat you with care, win your heart, and claim you for his own, he doesn’t deserve your special attention. If she brushes you off, wants to just be friends, or ditches you on a whim, she doesn’t deserve your unique protection and pursuit.

Evaluate the time you spend with the opposite sex, particularly those you may be attracted to. Are you hanging on with little to no encouragement? Move on, and save yourself a friendrelationship or worse.

Now that we’ve explored a few things not to do, what are the habits and behaviors that you want in your life, the ones that will set you on a healthy path toward marriage? Here’s some good news: there are things you can start working on now, whether you’re in a relationship or not.