

Myra's Mind

by Doug Woodhouse

Myra is probably one of the smartest people I know. She has a fantastic range of knowledge spanning everything from classical music to quantum physics, and she can hold her own in any conversation she might find herself involved in. I remember a long time ago, well before we were dating, getting into a discussion with her about the nature of intelligence. Whereas I thought the single most important quality of an intelligent person was retention, she felt it was organization. I would later find out how revealing these answers were about each of us as a person.

I personally have a terrific power of retention. If I care to remember something, I usually do. If the teacher says it will be on the test, I'll remember it. That doesn't mean I was a good student. Far from it. Homework, an educational tool designed to reinforce the day's lesson, served me no purpose and I refused to trouble myself with it. I also had little respect for teachers who taught for the test and little patience for busy work meant to fill time. Life's too short for busy work, I'd say. And although I was fascinated by subjects that interested me, I often found myself in inferior classes with a teacher teaching down to the slowest students in the class. This was a result of my middle-of-the-road grades, which in turn was a result of my contempt for homework and the like. Public school was by no means the ideal environment for me, yet I still to this day remember much of what I learned, and I still managed to graduate with honors, mainly to appease my parents.

Due to various quirks in my nature, however, I've used this knack for remembering things to develop a terrific mental database of entirely useless information about my friends. Middle names, for example. I love middle names. Everyone has a secret second name, and you can be very close to someone and know their deepest darkest innermost secret hopes and dreams, and still not know their middle name. Myra is a perfect example. Myra Edith. I can't think of another person besides her dad who knows her middle name.

Most people who know Myra socially are usually surprised to see her in her home. Myra may dress like a rock star and party until dawn, but when she comes home the rock star outfit gets folded in the hamper and washed the next day. Her sock drawer is organized by color and her book shelf follows the Dewey Decimal System. She irons everything, and her desk is so maddeningly ordered that I sometimes think she suffers from a mild case of OCD. Even in her “drugs and guns” phase, her mini-arsenal was carefully polished and cleaned daily while her pills were kept in neatly ordered rows in a cigar box under her bed.

But while Myra's mind manifests itself in her neat and ordered surroundings, my mind reveals itself to the world in the chaotic, disordered mess that seems to surround me everywhere I go. If you invited me to your house for a game of poker, by the time I've left the poker table would be in general disarray and there would be crumbs on your favorite armchair, even though I never sat on it or ate anything while I was there. I like to joke that I want all of my worldly possessions out in the open where I can see them, but the joke is never really funny to the visitor trying to clear a place off on the couch or trying not to step on anything too important while navigating my bathroom. But ask me for a book and I know exactly which pile to get it from. If I want to wear a certain shirt, I remember exactly where I took it off and exactly which door I draped it over. The phone bill? It's in the back pocket of my gray corduroys. I still have a week and a half before I need to pay it. I doubt a person without my awesome recollection could live the way I do and maintain their sanity, but in my opinion slovenly living sure beats wasting time cleaning. Life's too short for cleaning, I say.

I still don't quite understand how Myra and I came to be living together. I promised to keep my bedlam under control, and she promised not to get too uptight about it, and for two kids in love that seemed like enough for us to get by. For the most part I thought I was pretty good at keeping tables and counters relatively neat, and for a while she seemed content and happy with slightly cluttered surroundings.

After we broke up, I kicked myself for ever agreeing to live with her. That, in my mind, could have been what pushed her over the edge. She might have still been dissatisfied in the relationship, but at least she could have retreated into her own organized sanctuary and wouldn't have had to come home to a new mess of papers all over the bed. If we didn't live together, I might have still have had a fighting chance to convince her to stay. When we signed the lease, I thought, well, for better or worse, we've got to make this work for at least a year. But for Myra, life was too short to try to save a sinking relationship. She abandoned ship and cut her losses. I moved out.

Myra bounces back to the car and hops into the driver's seat. Even though I assume she checked her hair in the bathroom, she checks it again in the rearview mirror before pulling out of the rest area and back onto the highway. She glances back with disgust at the backseat, which is cluttered and messy as a result of my time back there. She runs the engine hard in third and jumps straight to fifth to gun it into the passing lane. She once told me that cleanliness is next to godliness, but I think everything is next to godliness, if you care enough to pay attention.

