

A MAN'S GUIDE

HOW TO LOVE A

PMSING
WOMAN

When Timing Is Everything

J A Y S T U L L E R



1

The Politics of PMS

*The way to fight a woman is with your hat.
Grab it and run.*

John Barrymore

Tick, tick, tick . . .

David could almost hear the ticking of Marilyn's menstrual cycle, like a sweeping hand slowly edging to the eleventh hour. A bright, brilliantly verbal, and energetic thirty-one-year-old, Marilyn usually bubbled with life, kindness, and good cheer. And yet, over the course of their four-year marriage, and especially since the birth of Ruben just a year before, David had come to dread that symbolic and peculiar hour, which typically arrived about three days before the onset of Marilyn's period.

The first sign, he now recognized, came when her normally lilting voice took on a sharp edge. She'd grow frustrated at the simple chore of folding towels, groaning and grouching as she dropped item after item on the floor. Her tenderness while changing Ruben's diapers disappeared. Instead of laughing and cooing as the baby kicked, she'd firmly grab his legs and hold them down, taking care of the dirty business in dead silence.

Tick, tick, tick . . .

When David pawed through the mail and found an unexpectedly-high Visa bill, he quietly tucked it into his briefcase. This was no time to raise matters of budget and household finance, and it didn't matter who made ill-advised use of the card. Several months ago, when he confessed to buying some golf equipment during Marilyn's eleventh hour, she grew furious at the indiscretion. "You're robbing Ruben of his college education, you idiot!" she screamed, in an outburst that started a three-hour fight.

David didn't think she'd mind the purchase. A couple months before, when he asked her why she'd charged \$200 worth of framed posters to decorate the hallway, Marilyn responded with a vigorous and aggressive defense. "You don't think I deserve to buy things I like?" she challenged. "I work, too. And I'm sick of how you're such a cheapskate and . . ." And so it went for several hours, ending when David took a blanket and pillow to the couch, a place where Marilyn agreed he ought to sleep.

The thirty-two-year-old computer programmer was never certain of what to make of Marilyn's mood swings. Early in the marriage, he figured that he simply hadn't yet got the hang of being a good partner, that he did things that justified her anger. But as the years passed there were too many disconnections; most of the time, Marilyn told him that he was wonderful. David didn't think he behaved differently for two days each month; only recently did he make the link between her moods and the onset of menstruation. Whenever a tampon box sat open on a bathroom counter, David was again in Marilyn's good graces.

Tick, tick, tick . . .

David heard the edge in Marilyn's voice. He agreed that the current cast of *Saturday Night Live* lacked talent, and that the comedy was lamer than anything seen during this decade. While hardly an arguable point, he murmured assent to her every other comment. This time, David vowed, he was going to envelop her darkening mood with gentle light.

On Sunday morning, he climbed out of bed early and fed Ruben. David prepared a breakfast of strong and hot coffee, waf-

fles, bacon, and fried eggs over easy, all foods that Marilyn loved. But as she sat down at the kitchen table, slugged down an entire cup of coffee, and took a couple of bites from the plate, her expression made it look as if he'd served her beet gruel and rubber biscuits. "It doesn't taste good," she said.

"Uh, but I thought this was your favorite," said David.

"It just doesn't taste right. I'm probably not hungry. Thanks anyway." She didn't sound as if she meant it.

"That's OK," replied David, regrouping. "You sit here and relax, look at the newspaper and I'll clear the table." He reached out to take her plate.

"No, I'll clear the table," said Marilyn, holding tight to the edge of the dinnerware. David tried to pull it away from her. She gripped it tighter, stood up, and tried to rip it from his grasp. "I'll clear my own damn dishes if I want," she growled. Standing toe to toe, the couple began a tug-of-war with the plate. Waffles, pieces of bacon, and eggs spilled onto the floor. And then . . .

Tick, tick, tick . . .

. . . with one hand, Marilyn reached for the table, grasped a bottle of Aunt Jemima syrup, and smacked her husband upside his head.

Boom!

Fortunately, the bottle was plastic.

"I could have hurt him bad if it had been glass," Marilyn later conceded. "Being grouchy is one thing, but getting that out of control is another. It was at that point I realized that I just might have a little problem."

FUR-SLAPPING FIGHTS

That little problem is obviously as much David's as it is Marilyn's, for he's the one individual in this world who bears the focused brunt of her irritability. While Marilyn certainly suffers from miserable feelings during these times, she holds her anger in check at the office. Colleagues at the CPA firm where she works

don't have a clue when Marilyn feels like her spirit is trying to claw its way out through the pores of her skin. At the office she's a complete pro, no more overtly edgy than any of the employees.

But at home, secure in David's love and free from the cultural strictures that the workplace demands, she's got a license to drive her husband flat into the pile carpet. And while David made a pretty good attempt at easing Marilyn's brewing agitation, he was operating on a limited base of experience and knowledge.

For one thing, the two never talked about the conflicts, other than for her curt apologies and his relieved acceptances in the wake of a battle. For another, like millions upon millions of other men, David was largely oblivious to the intricacies of a woman.

He'd never been told exactly how natural chemicals influence a female's bodily functions *and* moods. He didn't know that stress and various foods can make her emotional reactions worse, or perhaps better. He didn't know that sleep and exercise can sometimes lessen the severity or stop the onset of a woman's discomfort.

While David had a rough idea of how to speak with Marilyn during these times, his approach still lacked polish. What's more, he made his moves behind the right point on the curving clock, at the eleventh hour instead of the eighth or ninth. Consequently, their household battles had as much to do with David's management style as with Marilyn's malevolent but *potentially malleable* moods.

This is a problem, however, that has plagued men for millennia. It no doubt dates back to the time when hominids started walking upright and paired off with long-term mates, which led to fur-slapping fights thanks to australopithecine PMS.

As self-aware and forthright men and women will attest, David and Marilyn's story has a familiar feel. Short of the Aunt Jemima shot to the skull, such episodic squabbling is an all too common component of marriages and close relationships. It's often part of the resonating patterns of other marital fights, which start from different causes but usually unfold in the same way, often growing more intense and contentious over the years.

Such conflicts are one of the things behind a modern divorce rate that ultimately claims nearly half of all marriages, and causes turmoil even in those that hold together.

Because of the cyclic nature of her mood swings and its dead-solid tie to the days before the start of her period, Marilyn has the classic signs of premenstrual tension. (True clinical PMS has, as we will see, far more severe results than a few moderate shifts in emotion.) But the simple existence of premenstrual tension and PMS—albeit in a dizzying variety and combination of symptoms and degrees of discomfort—ought to be an easily recognized and accepted part of the human condition.

But when it comes to PMS, there's nothing that is simple.

Indeed, the whole phenomenon is wrapped in myths, stereotypes, and evangelistic campaigns to either contradict or dissemble the facts that form the basic truth beneath a stereotype. Because of this, chances for reasoned dialogue are often thwarted in the professional, public, and private arenas.

◆ Much of the medical world remains confused by the physiological changes in a woman's reproductive and endocrine system, which, in bizarre and even mystifying ways, seem to trigger psychological responses.

◆ Premenstrual syndrome is the subject of sexual politics as embroiling as any battle in the Balkans. All too often, political symbolists use PMS as a target for polemical attack.

◆ At the intimate interpersonal level—and this is the crux of the issue—PMS creates a profound feeling of vulnerability for both women and men. And quite naturally, vulnerable humans of either sex combat such positions with an elaborate and formidable array of vigorous defenses.

IT'S IN HER HEAD

Consider first the ways in which PMS falls into the Great Rift Valley of medicine. There's an old school of thought—still held by more than a few physicians and scientists—that contends premenstrual symptoms are a figment of the female imagination.