



Cruise Control

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These are just recommendations from the pseudo Comptroller. You're still Cruise Director." A smile spread across my face as I read the latest email from my husband, Shawn. I knew I had won.

The Love Boat had been sailing on rocky waters that day. Our morning spat over cell phones had digressed to curt comments via email. At issue—how we were going to financially support a last-minute decision to throw a bash for his birthday. I

balked at his itemized budget, because it left out a very important detail—decorations. We agreed we had graduated to a new level of party-throwing, beyond the days of using a kiddie pool to keep beer ice cold on the back porch. But my idea of preparing for the event most definitely involved a trip to Pier One. I refused to host a gathering without having the entire house aglow with candles smelling of biscotti, vanilla, and Asian spices. I imagined jazz music and happy friends sipping cocktails, and Shawn was interrupting my plan to morph our home into a Starbucks-Banana Republic-wine bar.

This spat was not entirely about money. Sure, he didn't want me to spend our life savings on candles, but the real issue is that I don't have a typical hands-off kind of husband. He wants to be a part of things. Take planning our wedding, for example. He was there for everything—meeting with the caterer, registering for the china, deciding the style of invitations. At the time, I had no idea what I was dealing with. Soon I learned I was marrying a man with definite opinions.

It started when he gently told me my suit jackets were too big, the "skort" was out of style (was it ever in style?), and it was time to throw out half the shoes in my closet. My husband is a self-proclaimed metrosexual. And the truth is that I love it. If I didn't have this fashion consultant in my life, I would be trapped in 1989, sporting wonder bangs and Keds.

But the thing I love about him is the thing that also drives me crazy. It makes him nervous when his debit-card-wielding wife enters a home decorating store without him. As my tone of voice escalates from calm and controlled to high-pitched and shrill, I declare I'm still a woman who wants to shop and decorate without having to clear my decisions with Cojo.

In this union called marriage, I'm afraid of losing my sense of freedom, my independence. I tell my single girlfriends searching for love to be thankful they don't have to call home to check in when girls' happy hour turns into two. They can go shopping any time they want, without having to turn in an expense report.

I want to be my own woman, so like a child I put my hands on my hips and shout, "You are not the boss of me!" Not always a highly effective method of communication, but this time it worked. Shawn had named me queen of the cruise boat, conceding the latest round in the battle of wills. As quickly as his message traveled through cyberspace, I was out the door to begin my shopping spree.

Inside the store, as I sniffed my way through pillars of wax, I found myself turning the candles upside down, investigating the price tags. My sense of smell was overcome by my sense of sight—the black and white sticker that read, "This is too much money for a candle." I huffed at my practical side and the part of me that can never make a decision. I had already spent an hour debating over fragrances and color schemes. I secretly wished I had invited the fashion diva along to help me.

The next day, as we were scurrying around to get everything ready for the impromptu party, Shawn returned home from running errands holding a bouquet of freshly cut flowers. They were carefully selected, matching our color palate, to spruce up the mantle and dining room table. As we separated the flowers and placed them in vases, I realized ultimately, both of us want the same thing, in party planning and in life.

Early in our marriage, when he took a job across the country, I packed up our belongings, stuffed them in a moving van, and drove 3,000 miles to be with him. Less than a year later, when I said it was time to go back home, he said okay. Later on, when I quit my career in the pursuit of happiness, he supported me. When I stopped believing in myself, he never lost faith.

Despite my tendency to kick and scream for independence, reverting back to pre-school days, I'm beginning to realize true freedom comes not from control, but compromise. Not ridicule, but respect for differences. I thrive in relationships that allow me space to be my best—and worst—self. As I hold on to my individuality and self-sufficiency, my life experiences mean the most when they are shared.

So if you ever see me running around the fun ship with my baton and tiara, you'll probably find my husband nearby, hanging out on the Lido deck. But rest assured, he's the one watching out for icebergs.

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