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Building tolerance

RACHEL EDDEY

On Sept. 19, festival-goers at the Plymouth Cheese & Harvest Festival will unite over cheese tastings, lessons, and recipes. While it sounds like a delicious event, I know one person who will not attend: my husband, John.

To be clear, John is almost perfect. He puts his dirty dishes in the sink, bumps my movie choices to the top of the Netflix queue, and sends my mother flowers on her birthday. He does, though, have one flaw that is impossible to overlook: My dear, sweet husband is lactose intolerant.

As a cheese-eating, milk-drinking, ice-cream-loving 29-year-old woman, I didn't think the relationship could sustain past our first date — who would go halves with me on a banana split? Or cook up gooey grilled cheese sandwiches? Or challenge me to a pizza-eating contest? — until a brilliant idea struck: I would cure him.

It seemed like a reasonable goal. John grew up eating milk's bounty; it was only after graduating college seven years earlier that his stomach turned on him and said uh-uh, no more. He blamed stress for the onset and tried to undo the damage first with pills, then with funny-smelling powder supplements, then by standing on his head and clucking like a chicken. Nothing worked. He began life without dairy, but I, increasingly annoyed by his insistence that I order menu items we could share, wasn't feeling the romance. If there was a cause for his intolerance, there had to be a solution.

"What do you miss the most?" I asked him one afternoon. He had tried dairy-free versions of all his past favorites and bemoaned each with equal passion.

"Cheese," he said. "Definitely cheese."

I walked to the corner grocer and perused the packages of Brie, Muenster, Swiss, mozzarella, and Edam nestled among other tasty-looking choices. My idea? Ease John back into dairy, one cube of Cheddar at a time. I made my purchase and returned home.

"Eat this," I instructed him after cutting a small piece.

"No way," he said. "You know it doesn't sit well."

"I'm going to fix you," I told him. "Now eat it."

He took one bite and was clutching his stomach within an hour. We followed this routine for a week, with me force-feeding him larger amounts of Cheddar each time.

"I'm done," he told me on the seventh night. "I tried this for you, and it didn't work. Let it go."

I was floored.

"You tried this for me? What about me trying this for you?"

"Rachel, I'm fine not eating dairy. I miss it, but I've accepted it. You want to cure me because it's easier for you."

I opened my mouth to respond but stopped short. He was right. I wasn't trying to help him overcome a major life obstacle. I was being a selfish spouse who didn't want the hassle of never sharing an appetizer.

I resolved to let him live his sorbet-filled existence in peace. He accepted my faults (I never put my dirty dishes in the sink, for starters) because we had agreed to this crazy institution called marriage. And I had promised — before 150 guests and a cantor — to accept him for who he was.

Besides, if I got desperate, I could always challenge myself to a pizza-eating contest. And while John couldn't participate, that was just fine: I'd need someone to keep time, anyway.

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