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It's Not You, It's Your Apartment



Date Repellent? Bob Strauss refuses to “blandify” his apartment by getting rid of his stuffed baby seal, even though it puts some women off.

By JOYCE WADLER

DATING is fraught with disappointments, so you can imagine how delighted a single woman might be to find someone like Albert Podell — particularly after she Googles him and learns how rich he is. Last year, Mr. Podell, a 70-year-old lawyer, gave N.Y.U. Law School \$2.9 million. He goes out four nights a week, to the opera, symphony or theater. He is well read. He says he has traveled to 162 countries.

Then comes that magic evening when the woman is ready to go back to his place.

“It’s totally unchanged, like it was when I went to law school in 1973, a time warp,” Mr. Podell says of his small one-bedroom in SoHo, a description that seems plausible, given the hot pink living room with the futon seating and the fraying contact paper on the kitchen cabinets.



Albert Podell said his sheets had sabotaged at least one romance.

The place is also dimly lighted, which, once you examine the kitchen nook in daylight, is probably not such a bad thing. The cabinets hold nothing but a six-month supply of powdered milk for Mr. Podell’s cereal, so that he can keep his trips to the supermarket to a minimum; the Formica countertop is peeling; the stove has been disconnected from the gas feed. (Mr. Podell, who usually eats out, sees no reason to waste fuel.)

All these things have proved detriments to love, but none so effectively as his sheets. Mr. Podell likes the ones from the ’60s and ’70s that tell a story: sheets with intergalactic battles or pink hippopotami or the Beatles. Since these are no longer available in adult-bed sizes, Mr. Podell’s sheets are now 30 to 40 years old. The fading is such that a person who saw one in a Salvation Army bin, having lost everything she owned in a fire, would remind herself that there was no reason to be desperate. The fading, however, was apparently not the reason that the sheets became a deal breaker.

“I was dating this very nice woman, I thought,” says Mr. Podell. “I was ready and she was ready to do the big deed. I take her to my apartment, go into the bedroom, and fling back the sheets, and she said, ‘My husband had these sheets and he was a mean-hearted son

of a bitch and you must be like him and I'm leaving.' ”

Spring is here and the restaurants will soon be filled with anxious and hopeful couples, ordering wine, dusting off their most luminous lies, thinking they might finally have found love. Then they will see their dates' homes for the first time. And suddenly some of them will realize that they cannot be with this person a moment longer — or at the very latest, because that wine was not cheap, beyond the next morning. A few whose homes have been romantic deal breakers may, like Mr. Podell, know what went wrong and choose to ignore it, seeing their apartments as a reflection of their brave refusal to bow to conventional taste.

“There have been at least 40 women who've said, why do you live here?” he says.

Make that 41. Why does he live here?

“Ever hear the words 'rent stabilized'?” says Mr. Podell, who's paying \$702 for a one bedroom in SoHo. “What do I need a fancy place for? A lot of people want to show off their wealth. It ain't me, baby.”

Then there is Bob Strauss, 46, who writes dating advice for match.com and has a real stuffed baby seal in his apartment. He didn't whack the seal on its silky little head, it's a family piece inherited from a rich aunt and uncle in Miami.

It is displayed along with Mr. Strauss's South Park and Sonic the Hedgehog figurines and Lego collection.

“It's provocative,” he adds. “I like going out with tough, smart, aggressive, challenging type people. It's fine with me if they want to argue about it; I don't want to blandify my apartment to make myself generically acceptable.”

Most people, however, will never know how their homes sabotaged their romance. They operate under the assumption that if the garbage has been discarded and the dog hair removed, the house is romance-ready. They are unaware that such seemingly insignificant details as a Klimt poster or harsh overhead lighting are proof to some that they are not dateworthy. For these poor innocents, a guide.

No Stuffed Animals, Even If You Are Dying

Alison Forbes, a founder of The Art of Everyday Living consulting service in Los Angeles, is often called upon to help make homes relationship-ready. It was her sorry duty to inform us that the stuffed animal pandemic continues. She believes it may show a reluctance to grow up — or, in cases where the stuffed animals cover the bed, a reluctance to make space for another person.

Jason Bunin, the 36-year-old bad-boy chef at the Knickerbocker Bar and Grill in Greenwich Village, echoed her disapproval.

“You see it more in younger girls, like between 21 and 25,” Mr. Bunin says. “Pink, purple, teddy bears, unicorns, all over the bed. I’d just whack ’em off with my arm.”

Why do men dislike stuffed animals?

“Too cutesy and immature.” Also, Mr. Bunin says, if you were to get involved with someone like that, you’d have that garbage in your house.

Mr. Bunin, by the way, is on the dating scene no more. He married Caron Newman earlier this month in an Elvis-themed wedding in Las Vegas. You can check out the video at cupidswedding.com. Mr. Bunin is the one in the black sequined tuxedo.

There Is a Reason Nice Buildings Are Not Named for Norman Bates

Sure, you can save money by moving into your mother’s house, but as always in matters of romance, you must first ask yourself: Would James Bond do it?

If you are still thinking about the answer, consider the experience of Adria Armbrister, a 30-year-old program coordinator at Columbia University’s School of Public Health. Ms. Armbrister met a man online through Yahoo and after a month and a half of e-mailing they had dinner. It went well: The man, who was 29, owned a business, he did not ask Ms. Armbrister to pay for her own meal or try to borrow money. On the second date, they stopped by his house to pick up an umbrella. The house had belonged to his mother, who had died five years earlier. The plastic-covered gold sofas and the heavy gold tasseled lamps suggested to Ms. Armbrister that her date had not redecorated — never a

sign of an enterprising personality. But the deal breaker came when she saw his room.

“We walked up three flights of stairs to the attic,” she says. “It looked like a teenager’s room. The computer was up there and the twin bed, his clothes were all over the floor. I was like, uuuuuh-huuuuh. He didn’t even seem sorry that he lived in a 12-year-old boy’s room, this was like normal behavior. It said to me, this person is not grown up yet. It was frightening. He’s lived his whole life in the attic.”

What did her date do for a living?

“He was in the real estate business.”



An Acquired Taste Albert Podell, a wealthy lawyer, has a rent-stabilized apartment filled with souvenirs from travels that has changed little since 1973. “What do I need a fancy place for?” he said. Women have complained about everything from his home’s size to the “glamour photos” of ex-girlfriends.

The Word “Ex” May Be Substituted for the Word “Mother”

It is also a detriment to romance when one’s date shares a roof with a former spouse.

“I met him at a function,” says a woman who is a lawyer in Manhattan and has been divorced for several years. She would speak only on condition of anonymity. “It was like” — and here she sings — “across a crowded room. He was very upfront about his living arrangement. He said he and his wife had one of those huge Upper West Side apartments

with four bedrooms. She lived in one, another couple lived in another one, whoever was in need of a home is in the third one. Every morning, they go to the kitchen and have coffee together. I couldn't picture myself in that scenario. It was like Frasier and Niles with that father and Daphne. He was very cute, but then I realized he was totally unsuccessful."

Although the Stasi Were Said to Love It



Deal Breakers Bob Strauss, likes to date "challenging type people" who can handle his Sonic the Hedgehog figurines and Lego collection.

"I can't sit in a room with overhead lighting," says Michele Slung, a freelance book editor in Woodstock, N.Y. "It makes me feel like I'm in a police interrogation room. I believe in lamps that are casting warm glows, and anyone that doesn't understand that, I can't be in their house, men or women. It's a matter of warmth; it makes people happy."

Ms. Slung insists on pink light bulbs, her preferred shade being Dawn Pink. She also uses amber lampshades.

"I don't think I could ever like somebody who got their lighting wrong," she says. "What this probably means is that I'm not in the market for a guy. If I ever found a guy with a beautifully lit house I would propose — although probably his wife would have done the lighting."

In the Afterglow of Love, Nobody Ever Reaches for a Hammer

Michael Longacre is a New York graphic designer. He believes that design people are aesthetically demanding, but in the case of one brief affair, the problem was a more basic sort. “This was a great looking guy, who worked on Wall Street,” Mr. Longacre says. “He wore like \$2,000 suits, but his great pride was really, really expensive shoes. He told me he had 50 or 60 pairs of these Italian shoes that are \$750 a pair. I go to his apartment, there was no framing on the doors, there were like test colors on the walls. He’d started work on it several years earlier. I said, ‘You’ve spent \$30,000 on shoes, but you’re gonna renovate your own apartment when you get around to it?’ He also showed me his waterless bong. Having high-tech marijuana equipment is another deal breaker for me.”



Evan Lobel bought and decorated a \$2.4 million loft. When his boyfriend returned from work with the Peace Corps, he found it too opulent; the couple broke up.

We Aren't Kidding About the Klimt

Adam Handler, who is 35, lives in Atlanta where he does grass-roots organizing for CARE. He is now married. But five or six years ago, when he was single and living in Washington, D.C., a nascent relationship was destroyed when a woman he'd been dating invited him back to her apartment.

“On her walls she had my two most despised pieces of art,” Mr. Handler says. One was “The Kiss” by Gustav Klimt. “I happen to hate Klimt, but ‘The Kiss’ is the most trite and overdone and what made it worse, it was in her bedroom. Then there was the Robert

Doisneau photograph of this couple kissing.”

That black and white photo taken on a Paris street in the '50s? That's kind of romantic.

“It's romantic when you're 16,” Mr. Handler says. “At some point you need to outgrow it.”

The romance, while it did not end that evening, ended soon after.

“She was attractive, she was smart, she was all the things I thought I would have liked in a woman, but I decided I didn't trust her judgment,” Mr. Handler says.

What was his wife's place like when they met?

It was a studio in Manhattan, Mr. Handler says, with a few really nice antiques. She also had a very impressive set of Le Creuset cookware. He had just about the same amount of All-Clad. It worked.

A Touch of Raffia Might Have Helped. But We Doubt It

Evan Lobel knows how to put together a welcoming apartment — in addition to being the owner of Lobel Modern, a vintage furniture store in lower Manhattan, he's a designer. But even that doesn't guarantee success.

“I was dating somebody very seriously,” says Mr. Lobel, who is 42. “He went away for a year to work in the Peace Corps. The two of us were in love. I said, I'm gonna wait, I'm not gonna be with anyone else, and I lived up to that. When he came back, we were supposed to live together. I thought, wouldn't it be a nice surprise, after a year of living in huts, to live in a nice big, beautiful apartment.”

While his boyfriend was posted in Swaziland, Mr. Lobel sold his 1,200-square-foot Chelsea apartment and bought a 2,500-square-foot loft, with a fireplace and stone bathrooms. It was a frightening financial leap. While his old apartment sold for \$1.5 million, the new one cost almost \$2.4 million. He brought in beautiful pieces: a cabinet by the midcentury designer Tommi Parzinger; a Karl Springer chandelier with an estimated value of \$25,000.

Then his boyfriend returned.

“He said, ‘What is this? I can’t live in a place like this, I was just around people who were hungry and dying,’” Mr. Lobel says. “In the end we were breaking up. For a while I regretted even buying that apartment.”



On Second Thought: Matt Heindl was turned off by rabbits in Breck Hostetter’s apartment, but eventually came around. They are now married and have a child.

It’s Not My Place, It’s You

Matt Heindl, who is 34 and does Internet marketing, remembers two terrible dating experiences. The first involved a woman who was a nail biter — he discovered this in the cold light of morning when he found bits of her nails on the bedside stand. He also has a vivid memory of the mildewed towel she offered when he took a shower.

“It kind of smelled like dog,” he says, with a tone of disgust. “I can smell it now.”

The second experience involved an artist who lived in an East Village tenement. As he entered her apartment, a free-flying parrot relieved itself on his head. Then a large rabbit darted out from somewhere and licked his feet. A baby gate separated a second rabbit from the first — there had been a nasty penis-biting episode, his date explained. Also, the kitchen wall was covered with antique egg beaters, which looked to Mr. Heindl like weird tools.

Mr. Heindl and his date, Breck Hostetter, have now been married two years, and have a

9-month-old daughter, Greta. She operates Sesame Letterpress out of their home in Carroll Gardens. It is named, Ms. Hostetter says, after a parakeet who passed away at age 12.

Can Mr. Heindl explain how a deal breaker turned into marriage?

“I seriously thought, ‘Shall I run? No, I like her, I like her, I’ll check it out,’” he says. “I thought about it, I asked myself, ‘Why are you doing this?’ and I decided it showed she can really nurture, because one was like a really old rabbit, a geriatric rabbit. And she baked, obviously.”

So there it is — if your date doesn’t get your rabbit or your seal or your light bulb, he or she is not the person for you. Mr. Handler, the Klimt hater, now believes he was probably looking for a reason to break up with the woman he was seeing because she wasn’t right for him.

Mr. Podell, of the cartoon animal sheets, proudly fills a page with the household complaints of his dates. They include the size of his apartment, the lack of a coffeepot, the nonexistent stove connection, the lack of closet space. His love life, however, is great. He has a 22-year-old Russian girlfriend, whom he met in Malta. They have taken vacations to Asia, Europe and India, with Mr. Podell footing the bill.

Mr. Podell’s girlfriend lives in Moscow.

She has never seen his apartment.