

WHAT YOUR BLACK HUSBAND WANTS YOU TO KNOW

CHAPTER 1

The Man You See and the Man You Live With

Imagine a Sunday afternoon with family.

Your husband has spent half of it on his feet. He has carried chairs outside, gone to the shop for the thing somebody forgot, and helped an uncle work out why his phone is doing something it has never done before. He tells a story you have heard several times. You still laugh at the part where he does the voice.

As you leave, someone tells you that you married a good man.

You smile. There are reasons you agree.

Then you get into the car.

The man who had something to say to everyone settles into silence. You mention something that happened during lunch. He gives a short answer. A little later, you try again. His eyes stay on the road.

You watch the houses pass and think about how much easier he seemed with everyone else.

Perhaps you recognise something in this imagined scene. Perhaps your version happens after church, a work function, or

an evening with friends. Perhaps he is never the loud man in the room, but he makes an effort with other people that you would like to receive too.

From the passenger seat, it can feel as though everyone gets a generous version of him and you get whatever remains.

That feeling deserves attention. It also helps to separate what you have seen from what you have concluded.

You have seen that he was talkative with other people and quiet with you. You do not yet know whether he is tired, distracted, worried, avoiding something, or unaware that you were hoping to spend time with him. You may have good reasons, built over many evenings, to suspect one of those explanations. But this particular journey has not answered the question for you.

Nor has the compliment at the gate answered it. Other people's appreciation cannot tell you what it feels like to be married to him.

You can be proud of a man and lonely beside him. You can value his kindness to your family and want him to turn some of that attention towards you. There need not be anything petty about the wish to enjoy the person you share your life with.

The difficulty is deciding what to do with the gap.

You could turn it into a verdict: he simply does not care. You could explain it away: he works hard, so you should expect less. Or you could begin somewhere more precise.

What happened? What did it mean to you? What have you not yet asked him?

This chapter begins there, with the difference between the husband whose habits you know and the person you may still be learning to understand. It begins with you as well. There are things about your experience that his familiarity with you may have allowed him to stop asking.

Being Useful, Being Known

In one conversation, the speakers considered how a man might come to connect being loved with doing something useful. Work, provision and other contributions could carry an unspoken hope for affection, even when he had not explained what kind of affection he wanted. Their discussion offered an interpretation of a pattern, rather than a rule about men.

It raises a worthwhile question for a marriage: when he is doing all these things, what does he hope you understand?

The answer might be simple. He enjoys taking care of you. He likes knowing that something which would have been difficult is now easier. He is pleased to be able to contribute. His effort may contain no hidden distress at all.

But there may also be a hope he has never put into words. Perhaps he wants his contribution to tell you that he takes your life together seriously. Perhaps he hopes you will notice how much he is trying. Perhaps he has become so accustomed to being useful that he struggles to say what he would like from you when there is nothing to fix.

Those are possibilities to ask about. They are not explanations to place in his mouth.

Consider the difference between thanking someone for what he has done and showing an interest in how he is doing. Both can matter. A person can receive sincere thanks and still have something he would like to talk about. Equally, a caring question does not replace the work that needs to be done.

Within your own families, you may recognise particular versions of this. The son who is called when transport must be arranged. The brother expected to know what to do about a problem. The person who can usually find some money when

somebody needs help. These roles can carry affection, pride and belonging. They can also make it difficult to admit that, on a particular day, he has no solution.

Your husband may fit none of those descriptions. He may have grown up with room to ask for help. He may be learning to accept responsibility rather than struggling under too much of it. Being a Black husband does not settle which account is his. The point of taking his experience seriously is to become more particular about him.

Within your South African marriage, you may move between different family languages and expectations. Sharing a language does not necessarily mean sharing an understanding of what a good son, husband or wife should do.

Imagine that a relative asks him for help during the Sunday visit. He agrees before discussing it with you. Later, you ask whether the two of you have time for what he has promised. He hears criticism of his generosity; you are asking what will happen to a plan you had already made together. That is one possible misunderstanding. The promise itself may also need reconsidering. Asking what he meant cannot settle who gets to commit your shared time.

You might discover that something you have read as indifference is connected to a worry he has been trying to manage alone. You might discover that he has been pleased with the way things are while you have been quietly hoping for more. Those discoveries lead to different conversations.

His explanation does not have to make your need disappear.

If he sees working hard as an expression of love, you can appreciate that and still want him to ask about your day. If he hopes for encouragement, he can say so without making you responsible for keeping his confidence intact. There is room to discuss what he wants and what you want without turning either

person into the keeper of the other's worth.

What matters is whether the two of you can begin saying what effort is meant to communicate, and whether the other person is actually receiving it.

That takes more than finding the right description of him. It takes his interest in your answer.

There Is a Woman in This Marriage Too

Perhaps you have already spent a great deal of time trying to understand him.

You know when to leave a subject alone. You know which question is likely to receive an answer and which will be met with irritation. You can sometimes tell, before he takes his shoes off, whether there will be room for your day.

If that is your experience, another invitation to be curious may sound exhausting.

There is a fair objection inside that exhaustion: you would like to be asked about too.

In a conversation about household life, a wife described the pressure she had felt to fulfil expectations of what a wife should do. Her efforts carried a wish to be recognised, and she spoke about the frustration of doing things she thought would matter without receiving the response she hoped for. The surrounding discussion also exposed assumptions the couple had made about domestic responsibilities without arriving at arrangements that worked for them.

Her account makes the question of performance wider than a husband's experience. A wife can also be trying to make love visible through what she does, while wondering why the person she most wants to reach seems unmoved.

That does not mean your marriage has this pattern. It does mean that a discussion of his need to be seen must leave room for yours.

You might be the one who remembers the appointment, knows what is running out, or notices when somebody in the family needs a call. You might also be earning the money, looking for work, studying, or trying to decide whether an ambition you once spoke about still has a place in your life.

The fact that you continue doing what is needed does not tell him how you are finding it.

And your inner life contains more than a list of burdens. There may be something you are excited about that has not made it into conversation. A course you would like to take. A friendship you enjoy. A small success you wanted to tell him about before the evening became a discussion of what needed paying.

You deserve interest in those things before they become a problem.

Imagine telling him about something you enjoyed and receiving a practical question about what it cost or whether it was worth the time. The question might have a place, but it may not be the response you were reaching for. You wanted him to share your pleasure for a moment.

He may have similar moments. Discovering them can be good for both of you, provided the movement is in both directions.

For him, understanding you may require staying with an answer he did not expect, asking a further question, or taking responsibility for something he had allowed you to carry. Your openness cannot do that part for him.

As we consider the person beneath his familiar roles, keep yourself in the picture. The marriage contains two people who need to be known.

What Care Looks Like Up Close

A different account offered a quieter picture of being known. A husband described paying attention to his wife's tiredness and taking part in the ordinary work of their home. He spoke about care as something he wanted to put into practice, including through cooking and cleaning. That was his account of his intentions and behaviour; it cannot tell us everything about how his wife experienced their marriage.

Still, the account makes something useful visible. Attention can result in a person doing something. A feeling does not have to become an impressive speech before it can become care.

You may recognise that kind of attention in your own husband. He notices that you are running late and takes over something you were trying to finish. He remembers an occasion that matters to you. He changes a plan because he has listened to what your day has been like.

These examples are ordinary on purpose. Cooking, cleaning and caring are shared responsibilities, not exceptional favours for which a wife must remain grateful. But the way someone participates can still carry tenderness. There is a difference between doing a task resentfully and showing, through the way it is done, that your time and comfort matter.

There can be pleasure in noticing that.

You do not have to distrust a good moment because other things need attention. Neither do you have to use it to silence a concern. You can enjoy a considerate husband on Tuesday and speak honestly about what was difficult on Wednesday. A marriage need not be judged afresh as entirely good or entirely bad each time one of you disappoints the other.

Sometimes the useful conversation begins with something that has gone well.

You might say, for example, that you felt supported when he took over a task without leaving you to explain every step. That gives him more information than a general description of him as a good husband. It tells him something about the effect of his conduct.

He can offer you the same kind of attention. He can notice what you do, acknowledge its cost when there is one, and show interest in the person doing it.

Appreciation should not depend on maintaining a cheerful account of the marriage. It can be specific enough to be true.

And there may be parts of him that you simply like. His humour. His enthusiasm about an interest you do not share. The way he becomes absorbed in teaching someone something. There is no requirement to find a wound underneath every endearing habit. Let there be things about the man you love that are allowed to be enjoyable.

Understanding him can include discovering more of that person too.

Leave Room to Be Surprised

After years together, it is easy to begin a sentence for your husband before he has finished it. You may know the story, the opinion and the joke. Familiarity can be a comfort. It can also tempt you to believe there is no new information.

Perhaps you know him as someone who does not like discussing his feelings. If he makes an awkward attempt, you might hear only how awkward it is. Perhaps he knows you as someone who always copes. When you ask for help, he might treat

it as a passing frustration instead of taking the request seriously.

Neither of you benefits from being held permanently to an old description.

There is a small discipline in listening for what is being said now. It allows someone to change without first having to become a completely different person. A husband who once avoided a subject might begin to answer a specific question. A wife who previously agreed to keep the peace might begin saying what she would prefer.

A new answer deserves attention. It does not erase an established pattern by itself.

If you have asked clearly for something many times, you do not need to pretend this is your first conversation. Being open to his experience does not require you to doubt your memory or make an endlessly more careful case for an ordinary need.

You can ask what is happening and still be clear that something needs to change.

His explanation can help you understand a moment while leaving a practical question unanswered. If he needs quiet after being with people, when will the two of you make room for each other? His willingness to help find an answer matters. If every time is unsuitable and the subject is never revisited, the request remains unanswered, however convincing the explanation sounds.

Understanding should make the next conversation more honest, not more elaborate.

It also leaves room for an answer you cannot resolve on his behalf. He might not yet know how to explain a worry. He may need to speak to a trusted person other than you. Marriage does not require either partner to become the other's only source of support.

You can care about what he carries without making your entire relationship an investigation into it. There must still be space for your lives: the ordinary conversation, the joke, the meal, the plans you are excited to make.

A Conversation Worth Having

Choose one ordinary situation in which you felt a gap between what happened and what you wanted. It need not be the largest disagreement in your marriage. For this first conversation, choose something you can describe without recounting the whole history of your relationship.

You can begin privately with three short notes.

What happened?

Write down what you observed. In the imagined example, it might be: we talked very little on the journey home, and my attempts to start a conversation received short answers.

That description gives the conversation somewhere specific to begin. If it is part of a repeated pattern, say that too. Choosing an example does not require you to treat it as an isolated event.

What am I assuming?

Name the meaning you attached to it. You might have thought he enjoyed other people's company more than yours. You might have felt that he had given everyone else his attention and left none for you.

You are not being asked to stop feeling hurt. You are identifying the explanation that accompanied the hurt, so that you can ask about it rather than having to argue from it as an established fact.

What do I want to ask?

Ask a question that leaves room for an answer. In this example: "When we got into the car, you became very quiet. What was happening for you?"

That is sample wording for the imagined situation, not a formula you have to memorise. Use words you would naturally say. A marriage conversation should not sound like somebody reading an assessment form.

The three notes are a beginning. Your own experience still needs a place in what follows.

You might tell him that you had enjoyed seeing him with the family and had hoped to spend a little time with him afterwards. You could explain that you felt alone when your attempts to talk went nowhere. Then make a request that can become an actual arrangement.

For example: "If you need quiet on the way back, can we agree on a time later when we will sit together?"

Listen to his answer, and leave space for him to ask about yours. The aim is not to obtain a confession or win agreement with everything you felt. It is to understand the situation better and decide what the two of you will do with it.

He might suggest something different that still meets the need. There could be another time, another way to spend the evening, or a habit both of you had stopped noticing. You do not have to preserve the first solution you imagined if a more workable one emerges.

A real agreement should not leave all the work of remembering with you. If he says he will return to the conversation, he can take responsibility for doing so. If you make an arrangement together, each person should know their part.

Then allow the ordinary next occasion to give you information. Does the arrangement happen? Is there interest from both sides? Can either of you say when it needs adjusting?

Look for participation you can describe: making the agreed time, acknowledging when it was missed, and taking responsibility for returning to it. An evening can go imperfectly while both people remain involved. Repeatedly leaving the same responsibility with you is a different matter.

If you have already had this conversation clearly, do not make yourself rehearse it as though the problem is your wording. Start from what has already been said and what remains undone.

And if asking an ordinary question exposes you to threats, punishment or intimidation, a joint exercise is not the next step. Put your safety first and seek support you can access safely on your own. You do not have to initiate a conversation simply because a book has suggested one.

The private notes may still help you name what you have experienced and what you need. Your clarity has value even when another person is not ready to participate.

The Person Still There

You may have opened this book hoping to discover something your husband has never quite managed to tell you.

One possibility worth exploring is that he wants to feel known beyond his usefulness. But only he can tell you whether that is true of him. Your marriage will not be understood by finding the most convincing description of men and fitting him inside it.

Begin with the person whose life is beside yours.

There may be an effort you have not recognised, an expectation he has not explained, or a kindness you have come to treat as

ordinary. There may also be a need you have stated plainly that he has not taken seriously. Looking carefully makes room for all of that.

And let him look carefully at you.

The woman who gets things done has a life she would like him to be interested in. The husband whose stories you can finish may still have something you have not heard. There is room for discovery without pretending that either of you is a stranger.

In our imagined car, no grand revelation has taken place. There are simply two people, and a question that has not yet been asked. What happens next depends on both of them.

Before considering the answers, it is worth looking at the expectations each person brought into that car: what they learned a good husband does, what they thought a wife should be, and which parts of home followed them into their marriage.