

# States of the Union

## LETTER TO A FRIEND

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

**D**EAR MARY,  
I have jotted down a few alphabetized thoughts in honor of your 14th birthday. Some are odd and some are even. You decide which are which.

### Birthdays

Sometimes you can tell what a person thinks of himself by the way he celebrates his birthday. Indifferently or joyfully—that is the question. I used to caution my family and friends not to fuss, but now that the years have started to pile up, I'm coming to feel that my birthday is *the* holiday of the year, an occasion for parades, proclamations, and Roman candles. Each year I make a wish and exclaim, "Let them eat cake!"

### Dating

Do teenagers still have "dates" or does the question merely date me? I bring it up because I happened to be your age when I had my first date. The girl's name was Sharlene, and she had long brown hair and very scary-red lips. (They scared *me*, anyway.) I called for her one sunny Sunday afternoon in

March, when the snow and ice in St. Paul are drippy, and together we sloshed up Hillcrest to Snelling Avenue, where we caught a yellow streetcar that took us to St. Clair Street and thence, on another trolley, to the center of the city. The trip took about an hour-and-a-half.

At the Downtown Orpheum we saw *Cover Girl*, starring Rita Hayworth. Her lips were even redder than Sharlene's, and she sang "Long Ago and Far Away" with much feeling. After the show we had milkshakes at Bridgeman's, and then we boarded yet another streetcar and began the long, rumbling journey home.

During the whole of this date Sharlene and I exchanged no more than a half dozen sentences, a few of which I can sharply recall. On the way home, as we sat side by side on the straw seat, Sharlene inched closer to me and said, "There's something I have to ask you."

"Okay," I said.

"It's something that I ask each of my dates," she explained.

"Okay," I said again.

Sharlene fluttered her eyelashes and asked, "Do you like kissing?"

"Huh?" I answered.

Sharlene waited for me to say more, but I had said everything that was on my mind. At last she heaved a sigh and turned her face toward the window. Whatever delicate tie of sympathy had been in the process of developing between us was plainly severed.

Well, we went our separate ways. A few months ago, however, while visiting St. Paul, I happened to meet Sharlene's mother on a downtown street near the Orpheum.

"How's Sharlene?" I asked.

"Oh, she's just fine. She's a grandmother already."

*Long ago and far away I dreamed a dream one day. . . .*

### Fights

If you hit someone, make sure you use your fist and not the palm of your hand. Though the fist hurts, the palm humiliates.

Also, please note that shouting is preferable to sulking, as is directness to sarcasm.

In addition, remember that most arguments are not to win but to settle. So speak softly and listen hard.

Finally, whereas it is all right to argue with a friend, it is risky to try to convert him. If you succeed, you have merely made him more like yourself—and less like your friend.

(If you disagree with any of this, we can meet later and have a good old-fashioned argument.)

### Friends

One doesn't collect friends like butterflies, or amass them like diamonds; one discovers them the way Columbus discovered America. Ahoy there! New friend ahead! Drop anchor and explore!

E. M. Forster said he would ra-

Lucile Aurore, although she was also called the Baroness Dudevant?

What is your dog's real name?

If you grow up in a house with a dog—no matter its disposition—you will always want to have one around. When I was a child we had a cocker spaniel named Sandy. He looked sweet and gentle, but deep down he was mean and nasty. His bite was much worse than his bark.

We had raised Sandy from puppyhood, so naturally we were loyal. My grandmother, in particular, always took Sandy's side. Gram could never tolerate criticism of anyone in the family, and Sandy, alas, was considered part of the family.

and head straight for the ankles.

"Get away from here! Scat!" the panicky postman would hiss at her, hopping and dancing and trying to dodge the dog's sharp teeth. At this point he always rang our bell. It was one of those polite two-chimers, not at all desperate-sounding.

My grandmother usually came to the door. "Your damn dog is biting me again," the mailman would wail.

"Well," my grandmother would reply, "if you kick him and yell at him like that, what else do you expect?" Then she'd pick up Sandy and hold the dog to her capacious bosom. "Nice puppy," she'd say, petting Sandy's hard little head.

Sandy would throw the postman a last evil leer as the door slammed shut.

I don't want to leave you with the idea that my grandmother lacked compassion. On the contrary, she was normally the soul of tenderness. But when the subject was Sandy, Gram was ethically purblind. So, for that matter, were we all.

Is there a moral to this fable? Yes. In fact, there are two, and you may take your choice.

Moral Number 1: You can't teach an old dog-lover new insights.

Moral Number 2: Beware of the dog—especially if it's yours.

### Goodbyes

The original version of "goodbye" was "God be with you," but people were in a hurry so they kept slurring and shortening until they reached "goodbye." Now the fad in parting is to say, "Have a good day." My friend Jack Jessup (you've probably met him) predicts that this too will eventually be streamlined. "Goodbye," he says, may be replaced by "Hagaday." Very well then:

Hagaday.

Hagayear.

Hagalife.

Affectionately,  
Dick



ther betray his country than a friend. It was a gutsy statement, written during World War II when nearly everyone seemed to be waving the flag, shouting patriotic slogans, and looking under beds for spies and traitors. Of course, Forster wasn't recommending treason; he was simply reminding people of the sacredness of their affections.

### George

I learned the other day that your dog George is a female. That makes her heir to a distinguished literary tradition. Did you know that George Eliot's real name was Mary Anne Evans, and that George Sand's real name was Amantine

One of Sandy's favorite pastimes was attacking the mailman. The mailman was not an old man, but his hair had already turned white, and one easily understood why. Sandy aged him every morning (though I only got to see it on Saturdays, when I was home from school).

The script seldom varied: Our intrepid postman would warily approach our door, all the time turning in a tight, defensive circle. Sandy, meanwhile, would be crouching in the shrubs, biding her time. Then, as the postman turned his back to stuff our mailbox, Sandy would strike. Grinning dreadfully, she would leap out of the foliage