

ON BEING A BACHELOR



WHEN IS IT TIME TO CALL HIM 'THE BOYFRIEND'?



SPARK ST. JUDE

I TALK TO MY MOM JUST about every day. During our chats, she usually inquires about my friends, my freelancing and my progress on a book project. And, for a while, she'd ask, "How's the Naked Runner?"

We'd always chuckle over the nickname she invented for the guy I'm dating. He'd earned the moniker because he'd recently participated in a race called the Fig Leaf 5K, held at a nudist resort in north Georgia. I thought it was hilarious, and I told my mom about it. Soon thereafter, the "Naked Runner" was born.

For a while, that's how I jokingly referred to him, too. When we first started seeing each other, I was getting over a breakup, which made me gun-shy about getting involved again. We were also both casually seeing other people, which for me was an ideal way to keep my options open and my heart closed while it healed.

All of which is to say we were a long way from labeling our relationship. So "Naked Runner" fit quite nicely in place of a more concrete—and, at that point for me, cold-sweat-inducing—label, such as (gasp!) *boyfriend*.

It's not a term I throw around loosely—I save it for the rare guy who really rocks my world. Reflecting on my love life, I can say that there have only been a handful of them I would classify as having boyfriend status. Of course, there have been others I would have liked to call as such, but they weren't interested in the title. Others were eagerly awaiting it, but I wasn't interested in giving it to them.

Still other scenarios may have been progressing toward the boyfriend/girlfriend level but stalled before reaching it. So, in place of these kinds of mismatches, the handy-dandy nickname is infallible: the Italian. ER. Richie Rich.

The third-person reference makes it a little less personal, a little more distant, and whether you're creating that distance or wishing it would close, such titles serve their purpose by taking emotion out of the equation. The terms "boyfriend" and "girlfriend," by contrast, are laden with weighty concepts like love, commitment and exclusivity. Until we're ready to address all that stuff with the one we're seeing, it's easy to shift the focus off our feelings by slapping on a convenient nickname or using vague terminology like "seeing each other," "dating" or the ever-puzzling "hanging out."

The hard part, however, is often the point when—or if—we decide we want to move past the nicknames and gray areas and into the next level of a relationship. If both parties are not on the same page, the boyfriend/

girlfriend status—or lack thereof—can be the deal-breaker. And though women are all too often slammed for demanding a commitment, I think today's breed is savvier, more independent and much less willing to settle for mediocrity just for the sake of being in a relationship.

Perhaps I'm overanalyzing, but if we dig a little deeper into something as simple as catch-up conversations about our love lives—"Hey, how are you and your boy doing?"—we might discover subtle yet powerful evidence that today's "Sex and the City" generation of women reflects a marked shift in thinking from

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eras past. We'd never have heard our moms refer to the men they were dating as boys; they were "beaus" who marked their territory by doling out their ID bracelets, class rings and letter jackets to their current "steady."

But I digress. Looking at more recent developments between me and my guy, I had known for a while he was boyfriend material, but it took my heart several months to catch up with my head. I think I literally knocked some sense into both when we went on a trip to Colorado with his friends, and I took a nasty spill on my snowboard on our very first run. Dazed and dizzy, I hobbled to a snowbank, clinging to his gloved hand. He asked over and over whether I needed a doctor and told me if I wanted to quit for the day—after we'd just dropped \$65 each for lift tickets—we could drink beers at the lodge instead. Through the tears still streaming from my eyes, I smiled and shook my head, and we headed back to the slopes.

Later, after a few pints at après-ski, I still had a headache, but my thinking couldn't have been clearer. Someone snapped our photo with a stunning dusk view of the mountains, and I just leaned in and whispered, "Are you my boyfriend?"

He replied, laughing, "I sure as hell hope so—I've been telling people you're my girlfriend for a while now!"

So the "Naked Runner" nickname has been retired. It may have brought a smile to my lips, but calling him my boyfriend has brought an even bigger smile to my heart. **SP** *Blane Bachelor is a full-time freelance writer who covers travel, health and lifestyles. E-mail her at blanebachelor@sundaypaper.com.*

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