

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

## FIFTY (OR SO) WAYS TO SAY EXCUSE ME, and charm the pants off an angry man

You may not believe this, but a lot of the fights you and your partner have can probably be avoided. It's one thing to do battle because he thinks monogamy means making love to one woman *at a time*, but quite another to have a knock-down-drag-out just because you're a measly forty minutes late to a \$300-a-plate dinner for his boss's favorite charity (a fund for dependents of men wounded in deer-hunting accidents). Being late does not have to lead to a quarrel if you're ready with a good excuse. (Hint: Where lateness is concerned, a good excuse always includes a near brush with death in one of its grizzlier forms.) Recognizing a good excuse, and knowing when and how to use it, can cut your quarrels way down. The following guidelines should help.

**When to make excuses—and when not to.** The more judiciously they are used, the more powerful your excuses will be. Don't waste them on unimportant matters, like trying to explain why you forgot to kiss his friend Lenny—who smells like a just-used pair of running socks—goodbye. And don't use them to wiggle out of doing things. It's much better to say up front, "No, I don't want to pick your mother up at the chiroprapist and take her to the periodontist," than to claim you must be in Cuba for the afternoon on urgent business for the phone company.

Excuses *should* be used to retrieve otherwise unretrievable situations, like the following: when you've cleaned his model airplane collection with a cleaner that removes all traces of paint along with the dust; when you've left his newly resoled boots in the back of a bus; when you've made a dinner date with a couple your partner calls "the two biggest bores of the twentieth century"; when, at lunch with his homebody of a mother, you've spent an hour explaining why you think all housewives are parasites; when you've bought a gorgeous art deco chair—really more a piece of sculpture than a chair, since it's totally uncomfortable to sit on—and spent twice as much money as the two of you had budgeted for a new sofa; when you've eaten the last of the roast beef and forgotten to mention it; when you've dropped the stereo needle onto the record with a little less precision than your partner

has dictated, so that it now sounds like The Police are singing Brahms.

**Excuses vs. lies.** Remember that excuses aren't lies. Lies are told to confound your partner, while excuses are made to comfort him; lies are told to deceive, while excuses are made to defuse. If you say about the lost boots, "they were stolen out of my hands by brigands who threatened to pull the buttons off my coat," you are telling a lie. If you say, "I was so preoccupied—I just couldn't stop thinking about how wonderful it was making love to you this morning—that I left your boots on the bus," you are making an excuse. If you say about the new chair, "I don't know how it happened. I don't even remember buying the damn thing. Maybe I was drugged," then you are lying. If you say, "I was sure you'd love it as much as I love the lamp you made out of the apple juice bottle," then you are making an excuse. When in doubt, the rule of thumb is: A lie invents circumstances, an excuse merely extenuates them—sometimes, admittedly, to the outer spaces of extenuation.

**Good vs. bad excuses.** A good excuse brings you closer to your partner, either by amusing him, bemusing him, or making him pity you. A claim to misunderstanding can make an excellent excuse, as in: "I assumed that you wouldn't *want* any more roast beef after what you said about feeling so stuffed the other night." Or, "I didn't realize you never wanted to see the Coopers again; I just thought you never wanted to see their antique-button collection again." A claim of innocence and/or persecution also makes a fair plea, as in: "I didn't do *anything* to the stereo! I just played it like a normal person. Can I help it if it hates me?" (A friend who relies heavily on this position claims that all of the appliances in their house have it in for her.) Feigning total incompetence is a good way to mollify a partner who is upset about something—like his ruined collection of perfectly-scaled models of World War II bombers. Saying, "I'm such a complete moron when it comes to cleaning anything," and showing how troubled you are by this defect is more likely to pacify him than defensively asking, "What's a grown man doing with an airplane collection anyway?"

An excuse is a tool—one that can help your relationship outlast any two of Elizabeth Taylor's marriages—and there's a bonus in knowing what makes a good one: You'll also know when your partner is making one to you. Always be as generous in accepting his excuses as you hope he'll be in accepting yours. Then, when the need arises—when you're both invited to a dog's funeral, or an afternoon of Buddhist chants—you'll be able to make excuses as a couple. Now that's togetherness!

by Bette-Jane Raphael