

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

HOW NOT TO GO NUTS WHEN HE GOES AWAY

In fact, how to enjoy yourself

Last year my friend Annie's husband decided to go back to his hometown to attend a high school reunion and pay a visit to his family. This, he thoughtfully pointed out, would be no fun for Annie: She had more than once speculated that since all of his high school friends seemed to have idiot-level IQs, there must have been something wrong with the school's drinking water. And her relationship with his parents was so rancorous you'd have thought they were *her* parents. Annie agreed that she would have a better time in their linen closet than she would in Peter's hometown, and he took the three-day trip without her.

An hour after he left, she became furious at him for leaving her alone for the weekend. Two hours after he left, she became suspicious about his real destination and started calling his parents' home, even though it was six hours from theirs. Three hours after he left, she was plotting his murder.

Annie is a prime example of what can happen when our partners go away, whether for business or pleasure. A lot of us handle such separations with about the same skill that we handle chain saws. In fact, we tend to exhibit behavior more associated with dogs left in front of grocery stores than

with human beings left in front of VCRs.

I'm getting better at handling separations because I live with a man who thinks they're the best thing about relationships. He travels often and firmly believes he travels fastest who travels without makeup, especially if it's on the face of his partner. Although I used to react rather negatively to his departure—nailing up the door behind him and going into his closet and switching around all his suit pants—I've gradually learned a more civilized and happier response.

Nowadays, if I don't feel sanguine about the fact that my mate is going to be away on business for several days, I remember the times when I've wished that he would go away for several years. I call to mind how on one recent evening he (1) complained that I had left the bathroom looking as if it had been used by the circus on its way through town, and (2) remarked that the telephone company must have mixed up our bill with the Pentagon's. Then, instead of the urge to sulk, I have the urge to carry his bags for him and throw confetti at his departing car.

I view my temporary singleness as a state of emancipation rather than abandonment. This allows me to feel like something other than Warren Beatty's latest leftover, and to engage in activities other than those that used to preoccupy me when left behind, such as putting my head under the covers and feeling sorry for myself, calling his hotel, and calling his hotel collect. Now I realize my vast opportunities—to eat whatever food I want, watch whichever TV shows I want, and see whomever of my friends I want, undeterred by my partner's evaluation of my choices as, respectively, poison, garbage and trash.

In this respect I am not unlike my neighbor Janice, whose lawyer husband is frequently away on business. During his ab-

sences, she says, she eats enough Chinese food to singlehandedly upgrade the economy of Hunan province, a result of her husband's ban on it when he is at home and his insistence that MSG stands for Male Sex Glands. Janice says she also rents a lot of movies while he's away, particularly those she's already seen and has been wanting to see again (prevented by her husband's belief that seeing a movie more than once is proof of serious brain deterioration).

I no longer equate my partner's absences with being left alone on a desert island without a hair-dryer. However, there are still times when I feel as if his departure has left a hole in my life as big as the hole in my argument that he could easily put an end to his absences by changing his profession to one that requires minimal travel, like elevator operator. At such moments, I use the trick I learned from my friend Sue. Her husband, a playwright, often travels out of town to oversee productions of his work. Whenever she feels particularly lonely during his absence, she dwells upon one of his habits she wishes he'd leave in Cleveland. She draws a mental picture of him eating a salami, which he has a habit of picking up whole and biting into as if it were an apple, "sort of like a Kosher Henry VIII." This image, she says, quenches her longing to see him in the flesh.

I gave Annie all of this advice when she called to tell me about her murder plot, and I think it helped. At least her conversation became noticeably less peppered with the phrase "slow death." I believe it's advice that can keep a lot of us from turning minor separations from our partners into ones that are (1) major, (2) permanent or (3) legal.

by Bette-Jane Raphael