

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

**ADVICE FROM A
SENTIMENTALIST**
Don't worry if
he forgets your
"shared memories"

I remember exactly when I first met my partner—the year, month, day and, give or take a minute, the hour. I remember exactly *where* I met him—the county, town, street, house and, give or take a foot, the spot. He, the other principal player in this event, has but a sketchy recollection of its circumstances. When asked to elaborate these, his complete answer takes only one interrogative sentence: "Didn't we meet the summer of that terrible drought?"

Here's the problem. When it comes to our relationship, I am cursed with sentimentality, doomed to remember and memorialize such things as the moment my partner finally said "I love you" (adding a warning that I not take it personally), and the songs Sinatra sang the night we got caught in a musical elevator. This selective recall wouldn't be such a curse, I suppose, if it weren't for the fact that my partner is about as sentimental as a lawn mower, and finds my eulogizing about our life together nothing short of irksome. He warns me not to confuse the first time we made love with Memorial Day, and gets stony if I start to rhapsodize about our

first meeting. Should I get as far as describing what he was wearing on that momentous occasion, up to and including the color and ribbing of his socks, he threatens to talk about the first time he saw me in a bathing suit. He didn't hook up with me, he says, so that he could be a perpetual guest on *This Is Your Life*.

My friend Sue, a sentimental sort like me, remembers every first in her relationship with her husband, from the first time she saw him to the first time he said he wasn't the marrying kind. This wouldn't be a problem, except that the only first David can remember is the first time he saw her fall down. Whenever Sue weaves one of her firsts into the conversation, telling their friends about the first time they square danced or saw the Washington Monument together, it triggers a mnemonic response in David that has him recount, yet again, how funny Sue looked sprawled on the sidewalk in front of her house after having slipped down several steps between her front door and the pavement. This recitation effectively changes Sue's mood from sentimental to homicidal.

Unlike Sue and David, my friends Peter and Annie both treasure vivid memories of their past as a couple. Unfortunately, they also have different perspectives on those memories. Peter, the romantic, remembers when they danced under the stars on a beach in Mexico. Annie, the realist, remembers that Peter got sick drinking the water. "Remember how beautifully the band played?" he asks. "Remember how violently you threw up?" she replies.

Another sentimental friend of mine has the particular bad fortune to have met her

exceedingly unromantic partner on July 14. On their anniversary a year later, when she asked him if he knew what day it was, he took it as a small historical quiz and proudly answered, "Bastille Day." Although my friend quickly set him straight, he still gives the same reply every year. This he does, or says he does, as a joke. If so, it is a joke that leaves my friend unamused. In fact, she is fond of reminding him that a basic premise of comedy is the unexpected. "Even Henry Youngman changes his routine occasionally," she points out, "especially if nobody finds it funny the first time."

Not every couple is a terrible mismatch in terms of sentimentality. I know one couple in which *both* partners are extremely sentimental about the milestones, and even the pebbles, of their relationship. Every piece of music they hear, including the national anthem, they claim as their song. They remember what each was wearing on every important occasion going back to the cradle. And every other sentence they utter to each other starts with the words "Remember when we...?" Unfortunately, once they remember the event in question, they feel compelled to tell everyone within earshot its details. This can be quite tedious to outsiders, and I recently mentioned to my partner that I found all their mawkish chatter boring in the extreme. His unsympathetic reply was succinct: "Now you know how I feel about *your* mawkish chatter," he said.

When those of us who are sentimental about our relationships find ourselves teamed up with partners who are anything but, we tend to feel cheated, even unloved. This is probably an inappropriate response. Just because our partners aren't sentimental, after all, doesn't mean that they don't love us, only that they show their love in other ways. My own partner, for instance, may not bring home flowers on the anniversary of the day we met, but he does regularly bring home funny stories, not to mention generous portions of Szechuan Seafood Delight. Chacun à son goût, I guess.

by Bette-Jane Raphael