

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

Get into the holiday spirit—**GIVE THANKS FOR WHAT HE'S NOT**

At this time of year it's traditional to count our blessings rather than our misfortunes. Instead of dwelling on the fact that we're out of work, for instance, we give thanks that Daryl Hannah hasn't moved in next door. Now it seems to me that we would derive great benefit from adopting this same attitude of Thanksgiving where our partners are concerned. Instead of bemoaning their shortcomings, we could give thanks for their strengths—or at least reflect on how much worse things could be.

For example, my friend Annie always complains that her lover isn't sympathetic

enough to her problems, that, in fact, he tends to trivialize them. Whenever she's unhappy about anything—be it the impossibility of getting her boss to call her something other than "sweetheart," or the possibility that she may be the oldest unmarried female member of her family, ever—her lover hands her the same four words of advice: "Snap out of it!"

Annie begins to consider herself lucky, however, after she hears how my lover handles *my* problems. One thing he doesn't do is trivialize them. Quite the contrary. Even a fairly minor difficulty, like the fact that I can't find my spare keys, gets a horrified reaction from him, accompanied by dire speculations that range from the possibility that the keys were stolen by a burglar/rapist, to the suspicion that my memory is slipping through my fingers like a wet cake of soap. (When I note that I hardly think I'm suffering from premature senility, he replies, "Who says it's premature?")

Several women I know complain that their partners don't do their fair share around the house—don't clean, do laundry or shop nearly as much as the women do them-

selves. (My friend Sue is particularly bitter on this point, reporting that her husband's notion of "doing his share" of the cleaning involves retrieving all the lost change from behind the sofa cushions.)

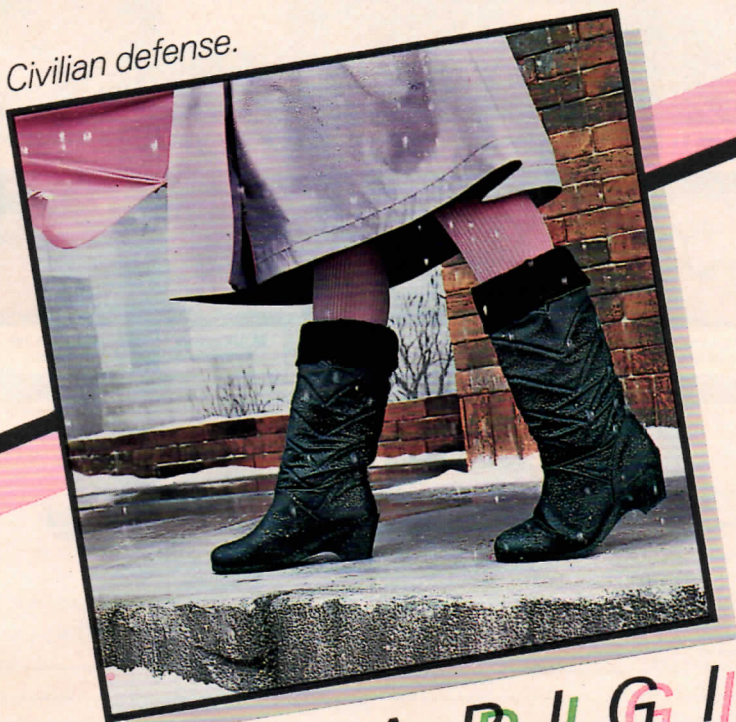
Here again, I am able to direct these women's attention to the bright side of the situation. Imagine, I tell them, how much worse it would be to live with a man like Amy's lover, Steve. Steve is scrupulous about "keeping up his end" and absolutely insists on doing his and Amy's laundry. The trouble is that he learned everything he knows about doing laundry in the Army. Everything goes into boiling water, and it all goes in together. This leaves Amy's white T-shirt looking like one of those brightly colored little stretchees one buys for a baby gift, while her navy cotton slacks look as if they'd been used as camel bedding. (Having Steve clean house rather than clothes is no solution, since he seems to think furniture should be polished with steel wool and wrinkled slipcovers ironed while they're still on the couch.)

The same "look on the bright side" strategy has me telling friends who complain that their partners don't appreciate them—silently accepting warm croissants for breakfast as if they'd been dropped by passing Concordes rather than schlepped home from French bakeries miles away—how my partner expresses his "appreciation." Handed a warm croissant, he's likely to wonder how much extra butterfat his heart is being saddled with (the implication being that I am expressing some form of hostility by serving it to him) and ask how much it cost (the implication being that I am wasting our limited capital on frivolities when we are likely to need it one of these days for lifesaving medicine—*heart* medicine, probably).

To friends who feel their partners are too critical, I talk about Marcia's ex-husband, who never criticized her. In fact, he thought she did everything so well that there was no need for him to do anything. ("Anything" included getting a job.) To those who complain that their partners don't talk to them enough, I point out Emily's lover, Fred, who insists on detailing for Emily every miniscule event of his working day (as a pathologist for the city's sex crimes department). And to those who say their partners don't tell them what they're thinking, I mention Alice's ex-lover, who always told Alice *everything* he thought, especially that he thought she was overweight, didn't read enough, and seemed to always make the wrong decisions.

All in all, I've found this kind of thinking most useful. It's helped both me and my hearers to rejoice this Thanksgiving, and to remember that the turkeys are on the table, not lying next to us in bed.

Civilian defense.



P A R I G I

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by Bette-Jane Raphael