

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY?**  
Somewhere  
between weeping  
and whooping  
lies the perfect  
celebration  
for you both

Birthdays often present couples with problems as well as gifts. The reasons for this are many: because one person in the relationship thinks birthdays should be celebrated with the kind of abandon seen on V-E Day, while the other thinks they should be treated with the secrecy usually reserved for presidential travel routes; because some people view these occasions as the time to bring up unresolved grievances (as in, "Thanks for making me the only twenty-seven-year-old unmarried female in my family!"); and because, where there is an age spread between partners, one might use a birthday to warn the other to act fast, since apartment units in the nearby retirement village are selling like hot cakes. For these and other reasons, partners in a relationship do not always look forward to birthdays with the same joyous anticipation that they look forward to, say, their mate going away on a two-day, midweek business trip to Milwaukee.

My friend Sue reports that birthdays at her house tend to be stressful events, and that the stress starts somewhere in the month before the actual date in question. That's when she begins to warn her husband not to be extravagant, which is his natural state of being. "If you get me something expensive, I'll kill you," she says, in a voice that does nothing to promote his pleasurable anticipation of the upcoming celebration. "The problem," she explains in her own defense, "is that Gil sees having enough money in the bank to buy a mink coat as reason enough to buy one, and I feel I should point out to him that if he bought me a mink coat, we'd have to *live* in it. He says my quibbling robs him of the joy of giving, but my position is that it's better than being robbed of the joy of *eating* regularly." Sue usually finds herself unable to maintain her practicality on Gil's birthday, and when she buys him a leather jacket, spending approximately what they spend on meat in a year, he wants to strangle her.

Another friend, Nancy, says that her difficulties center on the fact that she views birthdays as private, nobody's business but one's own. The idea of sharing her birthday

is as appalling to her as the idea of sharing her underwear. Les, her husband, feels about birthdays the way he feels about dinner checks: The more who share them, the better. He is always planning happy celebrations with their friends, through which Nancy sits with all the joy of a close family member visiting a coronary care unit. Les can't understand her glum attitude, nor fathom why her mood is not lightened by the arrival of the cake he's ordered, which always has the number of years Nancy's inhabited her skin written in large Roman numerals across the top. Four months later, he is invariably disappointed when Nancy plans a birthday celebration for him, the privacy of which would warm the heart of Howard Hughes.

Another woman I know complains that her partner has a tendency to view birthdays as historic events and to commemorate them accordingly. "But I don't really *want* a tree to be planted in honor of my arrival on earth, and I am not comforted by the prospect of 'watching it mature' along with me, as he sickly expresses it. And I can't make him understand that planting trees and making charitable donations are things you do in memorial for dead people."

My own partner is under the childish delusion that birthdays are occasions for celebration, while I understand that they are occasions for condolence. A simple black-edged sympathy card is all I'm looking for come every August 24th, and I tend to resent his insensitivity to my grief, and his insistence on emphasizing the "Happy" in "Happy Birthday."

If you'd like to avoid turning birthdays into armed confrontations, keep this fundamental point in mind:

Your partner's attitude toward birthdays was set long before he met you, and there's probably not much you can do to change it. I mean, if the only thing he had for his birthday as a child was a small cupcake with a candle in it, then you'll have to accept his now wanting to celebrate these early events as if they had planetary significance. Conversely, if every year on your birthday your parents embarrassed you by giving you a surprise party while you were in the tub, and behaved as if *your* birth and that of the heir to the English throne had global significance, then your partner has to understand your desire to spend the day in a darkened and well-secured room.

And keep in mind that nobody, no matter how outwardly indifferent, really wants the day he or she was born to go unnoticed, or really means the words "I don't want you to make a fuss. Just treat it like any other day." Follow those instructions and you might find that on *your* birthday, you'll be hosting a party for one.

by Bette-Jane Raphael