

BAD LOVE

What
to do
when
the
wrong
thing
comes
along

My friend Emily is smart and funny and knows it. She makes good money as an illustrator, a profession in which many other people starve. She is level-headed and generous with her time, and I count myself lucky to have her for a friend. Maybe that's why I remember so clearly the day she told me about the new man in her life. After describing someone who sounded as if he had the looks of a movie star, the mind of a physicist and the charm of Dick Cavett, she ended with a breathless "And he loves me!" The happiness in her voice, and the anticipation of more happiness to come as she told me of their plans to be together, were evident and infectious.

They were also premature, and inaccurate. She and this man have had a relationship for over a year now, and I don't think I've ever seen her really happy in it. The man she loves—and who says he loves her—thinks she should take off some weight, wishes she would wear skirts more often and ridicules her for watching too much television. When anything goes wrong in their lives, he thinks it's her fault. When anything goes wrong in *his* life, he takes it out on her. His love hasn't made my friend's life happier—only more dramatic.

This is a fact Emily finds hard to recognize. Like most of us, she was brought up to believe that loving someone and being loved in return would make her happy—was, in fact, essential to happiness. That's one reason we all want to be loved.

This desire for love leaves us vulnerable, however. It tends to make us less cautious than we should be—less cautious than we are when it comes to matters far less important than forming an intimate relationship. When our romantic fantasies are aroused, we aren't always able to process negative information about the loved one, and about the kind of love he's really offering.

This inability leaves us undefended against people for whom love isn't so much an emotion as a weapon, or a license for bad behavior. For such an individual, the loved one is less a partner than someone upon whom he works out his problems—or blames for them. We're talking about something more insidious here than a simple inability to commit to a loved one. Indeed, these people may be able to commit themselves, but the price they exact for that commitment can be astronomical. Being loved by them is not the blessing we were taught love ought to be.

For several years, my friend Annie lived with a man who maintained a "friendship" with an old girlfriend—a woman who was still in love with him. Letters from this woman would regularly arrive in Annie's mailbox, as would phone bills hefty with long-distance calls to her number. Whenever her boyfriend's business took him anywhere remotely near his ex-lover's home, he would visit her. Although Annie begged him to end the relationship, he said that his old

(Continued)

by Bette-Jane Raphael

girlfriend needed him. When Annie argued that *she* needed him, he accused her of trying to "control" him.

If this sounds like a soap-opera situation, that's because it is. After Annie finally ended the relationship, she realized that her boyfriend needed soap opera, that for him it was the stuff of love. She discovered this when she found herself being used to torture the next woman her ex-lover became involved with, in much the way he'd used his previous girlfriend to torture *her*. She saw then that he was a man who measured love by the amount of suffering it created.

Many of us have been involved with someone whose ideas about loving are seriously flawed. There seem to be a lot of people around who learned the wrong lessons about how love works. We've all learned slightly different lessons: You may think love demands verbal and tactile expressions of its existence on a regular basis; he may think it's an emotion that is best expressed obliquely, by caulking the shower stall, perhaps, or bringing home Chinese food. But some people didn't just learn different lessons, they learned *bad* ones. And they are the people we fall in love with at our peril.

These men don't wear signs, and they are not, strictly speaking, villains. They just happen to be lousy at loving, and make lousy life partners, a fact about which they may be as ignorant as their potential lovers. They can

be both charming and seductive, and if we aren't careful, even the smartest of us can find herself falling for one of them. Even the most sophisticated of us may fail to recognize the ways love can be distorted by those who don't have even a minimal understanding of what a loving relationship is all about.

Ascertaining whether you're involved with such a partner requires asking yourself how you feel about your relationship, and how you perceive your partner operating in it. (The questions are simple enough, but asking them of yourself may be difficult, especially when you are not sure you want to hear the answers.) Do you feel the relationship ultimately adds to your happiness? Do you feel cared for, respected, valued by your partner, regardless of whether he says he loves you? Do you feel as if you have power as well as responsibility in the relationship? Do you feel that your partner is as concerned with your needs—for security, appreciation, or whatever—as you are with his? If the answers to these questions are yes, you need look no further.

If the answers are otherwise, you may be involved with a man who has a fatally flawed view of love. You can try to change him, leave him, or stay with him at any cost. Only the last of these alternatives is an essentially destructive one; the first two bear consideration in the order they appear.

Men who learned the wrong lessons about loving are not necessarily and forever precluded from learning the *right* ones, given the chance. You need to find out whether


your partner is able and willing to change. That means defining, for yourself and for him, your needs in the relationship, and what he must do to meet those needs. If you need a certain kind and amount of consideration from your partner in order to feel comfortable in the relationship, then you must tell him—whether that means his remembering to call you if he's going to be late, or checking with you before he makes a social engagement for you both. If these things sound elemental, they may need to be. No matter how smart your partner is in other areas, things might have to be spelled out just that literally. If you feel you are unequal to the task, you might both consult a couple therapist for help in working things out between you. Or you might try drawing up a contract together, listing what each of you expects when it comes to taking care of one another and the relationship.

It's only by making these efforts that you can find out who you're dealing with, and how your partner responds to them will tell you quickly enough the kind of man he is: a man capable of stretching himself and reworking his definition of loving, or a man who has no interest in a partnership that involves taking care of any but his own needs. The former is someone you can live with, the latter, someone you can't.

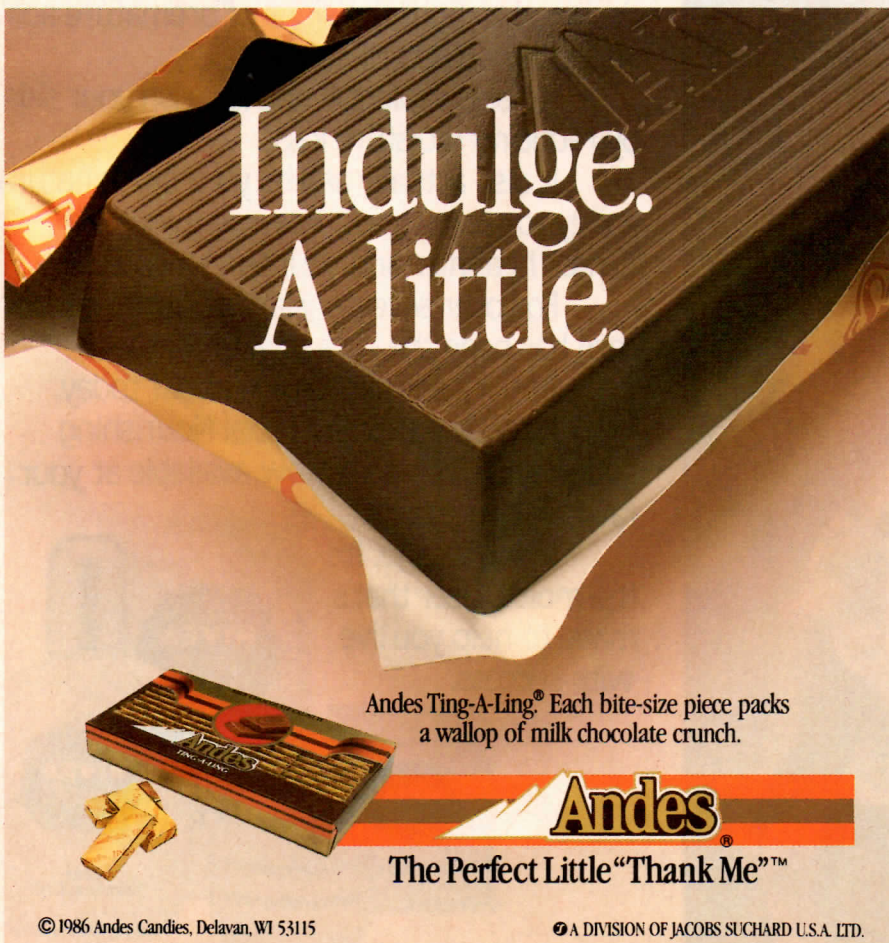
One friend of mine had to face such a man, who at first gave no evidence that he understood they were *both* responsible for taking care of their relationship. While he expected her to give her undivided attention to his problems, entertain his parents when they visited and plan her schedule around his, he was impatient with her problems, balked at visiting her family and planned weekends around his own priorities.

After they had been together for about a year, my friend realized that things weren't working for her. She confronted her lover, and explained how she felt their relationship was askew. His response was initially defensive, but then he attempted to give her more of what she needed. He doesn't always succeed, she reports. (He still hates going to her parents.) But he tries, and his evident exertion on her behalf makes it worth living through his failures. As my friend puts it, it's easy for some men to love generously, but when a man who finds it difficult makes an effort for you, it can be very gratifying.

So maybe you *can* get blood from a stone. But surely an easier route involves learning to recognize a man who's bad at love. Then, when you encounter the man who doesn't telephone when he says he will—and who gets angry when you protest, or the one who takes you to a party and spends most of it talking and laughing with another woman, you can decide early in the game to head for the nearest exit.

Once we're alert to its symptoms, we can protect ourselves from bad love. At the very least, we can learn to recognize the wrong thing when it comes along and extricate ourselves from it expeditiously if we have to. And then we can hold out for the real goods: love that enriches, and not merely complicates, our lives. 

Bette-Jane Raphael often writes about love relationships for Glamour.



Indulge.
A little.

Andes Ting-A-Ling® Each bite-size piece packs a wallop of milk chocolate crunch.

Andes

The Perfect Little "Thank Me"™

© 1986 Andes Candies, Delavan, WI 53115

A DIVISION OF JACOBS SUCHARD U.S.A. LTD.