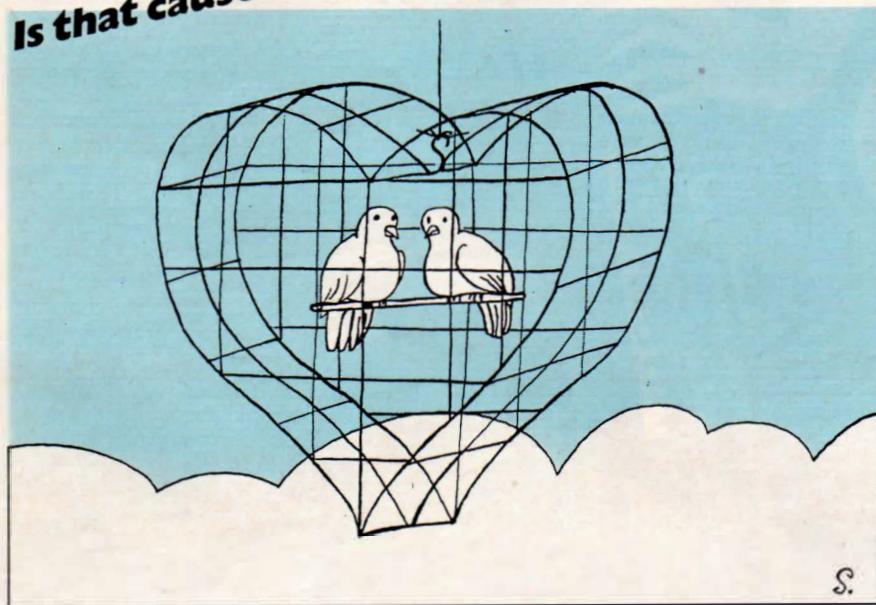


HERS/HIS

FOUR YEARS WITH THE SAME MAN: Is that cause for astonishment?



I'm aware there was a time when people mated for life, like swans. But these days, it seems that four years with the same man is cause for astonishment; and so there is something at once foreign and wistful about the notion of a lifetime relationship.

Although my own partner and I are hardly candidates for the Roy Rogers/Dale Evans Award for longevity in a relationship, the fact is that we *have* made it for several years together (even if you don't count the three months in '81 when we didn't speak once). And yet I still have contingency plans, regularly updated whenever we fight, for when we separate—an event I insist on seeing around every bend.

A case in point, the Asparagus Incident: Last spring my partner and I ripped up a sizable chunk of lawn to plant asparagus. Now, I like grass; it's green, and you don't have to cook it. Asparagus, on the other hand, I can take or leave. So trading in our grass for this edible stalk was done over my vigorous protests, especially when after hours of planting, my Mr. Greenjeans informed me that we would not get a crop of the stuff for three years. "Three years!" I yelled. "We probably won't even be together in three years. How on earth are we supposed to eat it?"

Obviously, worrying about the demise of a

relationship while in the midst of living it is counter-productive, especially since prophecies do seem to have a way of fulfilling themselves. Moreover, making "goodbye" the subtext of "hello" is simply not healthy communication.

Still, for me and for a lot of other women I know, to relax in a relationship means to risk losing it. The feeling behind my anxiety seems to be that if I stop being vigilant, stop keeping the end in sight, it might creep up on me unawares.

Of course, it's only common sense to prepare oneself for the possibility of being on one's own at some time in the future. The times we live in argue against sanguinity. When you turn on the Phil Donahue show to learn that some women are now sharing men, there being so few eligible ones extant, it's not hard to imagine a clutch of eager females gathering outside your door waiting to snatch away your prize.

Yet there is a fine line between being *realistic*, and being *pessimistic*, and it is that line I find myself tripping over too often. I'm aware that if I, not to mention my partner, am ever to be happy in love, my anxieties should be kept within manageable limits.

This means, among other things, not *always* following up the words "I love you" with the phrase "too bad it can't last." It means

not bringing up my fears on every occasion that calls for future planning, such as buying theater tickets two months in advance. (Like harping on his old girlfriends, this kind of repetition could put ideas in his head: for example, the thought that I am *right* and the relationship is probably going to end in the foreseeable future.)

On the other hand, I've found that sharing my fears with my partner in one fell swoop every so often *is* probably a good idea, if only to let him know where I'm coming from half the time. There are isolated occasions when it is actually comforting to be told I'm crazy, like when I confide to my partner that I never thought our relationship would outlast the dishwasher.

I've also decided to take a hint from the more constructive way men like my partner often handle their relationship anxiety. If he plants asparagus, I'll plant a small tree that won't give real shade until sometime in the mid-nineties—or suggest we take out a thirty-year mortgage together.

I'm aware, too, of the probability that the best way to protect a relationship from the ravages of constant worry is to take good care of it on a day-to-day basis, and that finding new ways to work out our differences lessens the chances of those differences becoming insurmountable.

I also know that I want to behave in ways that reaffirm and strengthen our commitment to one another rather than in ways that strain and shred it. So, if he can't stand my telling funny stories about his relatives, I won't tell them—no matter what it costs me in social clout.

Finally, I understand that it's not a bad idea to take care of myself as well as the relationship. When I know I'm earning a living and enjoying myself, independent of my partner, then the prospect of losing him, as unhappy as that may be, doesn't necessarily spell annihilation. It's reassuring to know that I'll still be able to have a good time, not to mention eat, whether the two of us are together or not.

Taking care of me *and* us makes the expectation of losing each other seem less and less likely, more and more a fantasy—which is all it actually is. Right now, anyway.

by Bette-Jane Raphael