

Jennifer Webb

THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS AND SOME OBSTACLES IN ITS PATH

Today Stuart said to me, "You're a bit down on men, aren't you?" Just because I agreed with him that it's easier to live with women than with men.

Oh sweetheart, you do jump to assumptions. I never really said it's always easier for women, with women. Did I? I didn't necessarily mean it's hard to live with men. And I'm sure I'd never say that women are inevitably nicer. We never say that, women. Just the other day, for instance, Judith said to me, "Have you noticed how difficult women's friendships can be? Like, what's the correct procedure for visiting? Should you call unannounced on a good friend? How long can you stay without overstaying your welcome? How soon should you leave without it seeming just a casual visit, a duty visit?"

"Some of my best friends are men," I said to Stuart, justifying myself. "All my favourite lovers have been too." Never having had the nerve to love women, not like that. Being afraid of what to touch and what to say and how to move. It seems easier to go with what you know.

"Let me tell you a story," I said. "Let me explain about love and life and the relations between men and women. Down on men? Not me, never. Cautious? Well, yes, perhaps. Aren't we all? And with reason," I said. "Not that any of us find it easy," I said. Except maybe Judith.

Of us all, Judith has the most fun. She stays longest in the shower, singing on key. She gets to lick out the icing bowl and eat the last of the chickpeas. She dances more lightly, comes more often, and quickly, she tells me, oh quickly, over and over again. I lack Judith's *jouissance*. As does Raymond. That's *Raymond*, not *Raymond*. He's French. His English is barely accented, but he is French, having been born there, having lived there for nearly 14 years, and that makes him almost an expert. In our town, actually an expert. Raymond. My husband. Once my lover. Raymond finds me a little *gauche*. He speaks to me in quick French phrases, knowing I understand only English. Oh, I've picked up the odd word here or there, living with Raymond, but not enough to keep up. He tolerates me anyway, despite my *ennui*. He loves me. He loved me, once.

LINQ

The story I told Stuart is that story which circulates endlessly, slipping and sliding between subjects, racked with uncertainty, yearning for serenity. It's love, of course. Or rather, romance — what else? What else is there but romance? I love you, we cry into space, I hate you, I need you, I want you so, give me some room. You're so beautiful, you're too old, you're too needy, you don't you won't commit, you want too much, I need you so, you drive me mad. We go round and round, thus. "For instance," I said to Stuart, citing case histories from among my friends to prove my point:

- Robert is in love, endlessly and desperately, but his lover has left him and he refuses to accept it. He thinks all he has to do is be sad enough, for long enough, and his lover will relent and return.
- Darryl is in love, and his lover lives far far away, and can't be near. So Darryl loves, and yearns, and wakes in the small hours of the morning to watch really really bad movies on TV, because what else, after all, can he do?
- Timothy loves his wife and his lover, and not being able to choose between them, unable to stop himself going boing-boing from bed to bed, has lost the precious things in each of his loves, and copes, now, by rushing anxiously busy from day to day.
- Martin, the other day, woke with that heartdroppingly empty sensation of being in love, but he lacks an object, and thinks it must be a hangover from a past life. And says, "As if it's not tough enough coping with the shit this life brings; why should I have to deal with past life shit too?"
- And Christopher was in love too, and was dropped, he said, and lay around feeling depressed until he remembered how it's done, and went out making love to willing women, and leaving them, and leaving them pain, and feeling just that bit better about himself. Our self esteem, after all, being predicated on others' lack.

So much for the men. I am in love too, though I didn't tell Stuart about it, and my lover lives, like Darryl's, far away, and I cope by pretending I don't love him at all, though I listen for the phone, I wait for the postman, and every so often I start to cry inexplicably. And think, why do I care all the time, and you only care some of the time? Anger helps. Sometimes.

But Judith loves indiscriminately and cheerfully, and without investment so that she magically, miraculously, avoids the pain. Judith believes in commitment, she says. She won't sleep with a lover without a genuine commitment, she says, and at the moment she is engaged to three men. In



LINQ

three different towns. Two have given her rings, and she has to be careful to wear the right ring with the right man, and no ring, of course, with the third, who is called David. David doesn't believe in rings, claiming they are symbols of the enslavement of women. Also he doesn't want to spend maybe \$700 on a trinket. Judith doesn't mind. She focuses on the stories she lives for each of the separate men, and constructs and reconstructs, inscribes and reinscribes herself effortlessly from bed to bed. Lucky Judith.

My husband Raymond loves me with all my faults and little uglinesses, he says. But, I can tell, he loves David more. Raymond speaks of David constantly, and is cool and nonchalant in his presence. Judith laughs about it, although David is one of her three, the local one. Judith laughs about it, and pours me glasses of wine, and makes me laugh too. Lovely Judith.

Judith and I sit up late at night, often with David, to discuss the meaning of life and to swap aphorisms and truisms. David enjoys this, he says, gazing at Judith. After three years together (or at any rate, after being one third of her love for three years) he is still passionate and tender, still committed, still promising and meaning and doing. Judith loves him less, I suspect, but they cope admirably. There's never equity in relationships, after all, but we cope somehow.

So much for that. We all know these people, or people like these people. What I wanted to find out, though, is where it all started, this story that brings us rage and pain and delight; that brings us days filled with sunshine (and just a little bit of rain). It's not inherent, after all. Nothing is. Possibly it was the fault of the Elizabethans, turning a comfortable in-out in-out and hard work and having children and sharing assets without excess emotion, into a slipping from state to state, from self to self, a loss of stasis, a peering always into the void (and most of the time spotting at the bottom sweet roses and carnations and chocolates, waiting always just for me).

Stuart rather likes that suggestion. But the more likely truth, the one I propose here, the one Stuart rejects, is that love is a social product, created by fairy godmothers, and promoted by advertising agencies for the following benefits:

1. the sale of wine and roses.
2. the sale of chocolates, expensive clothing and personal care items — razors, perfumes, deodorants.

3. the sale of rental property, household furnishings, family sedans and holidays at the beach.
4. the sale of obstetric services, childcare items, schoolwear and sports gear.
5. the sale of legal services — child custody, care of the family dog, settlement of the family home.

It's a matter of public record that marriages based on parental pragmatism last, while those based on sweet desire fall apart, as do all things now, now that the centre is (thankfully) sliding away to the margins. Don't argue, Stuart, it's true. And yet we believe in love, and writhe in noisy sweaty bliss, and sob and rage in an angry agonised pain that's a kind of bliss, when it all inevitably falls apart.

David came to see me the other day, and told me his fears about Judith whom he suspects of having wandering lusts. Judith has been less careful lately, has worn rings on her wedding ring finger, has murmured the wrong name in her sleep, has cried out the wrong words and made inappropriate moves in her orgasmic delight. David sees this as unnatural, unreasonable cruelty, and tells me, inexplicably, that he fears for her safety. "David," I say nervously, "I'm sure she's quite safe. I'm sure everything will be all right." And I hold him while he weeps.

Later I call Judith and warn her. She laughs a little, but sounds moderately perplexed.

David comes to see me again, to talk and talk and sob. He has done everything right, he says. In everything he has shown complete integrity, and he absolutely knows now, without a doubt, that she is not faithful. Surely I didn't tell him, surely I didn't let something slip? Not me.

David comes back night after night to see me. Raymond stays home most evenings now, which I feel is possibly a hopeful sign for the future of our marriage. Raymond pours drinks for David and holds him while he weeps. David tells me he no longer sleeps at night, and hasn't slept for about three months now. Perhaps he sleeps at work, I suggest, and he shakes his head sadly, a shaggy burnt-out lion, and wonders to himself about the extent of my concern and affection. He leaves later, much later, about 3 am, and I have to get up and go to work soon, and feel less sympathetic towards his pain than I did at 9 pm.

This story goes on and on for weeks. I try to remain sympathetic and objective, but David is overstaying his welcome, he is becoming a bit of a burden. Even a bit of a bore. That sounds cruel. Judith's David, after all, is filled with grief and suspicion and is growing a little peculiar. He confronts Judith, my golden friend, and puts this to her — that he (he read it somewhere, or someone told him) has three fiances, three lovers, that he has given up three years of his sweet life that is slipping so swiftly away, and she doesn't care. Or not enough, anyway. Judith, my Judith, laughs gently and pats his knee and says, "Well, I told you, poppet, that I didn't believe in monogamy."

David leaves in tears and comes to my house, briefly, and tells me he is going away for a while. We do not see him again, Raymond and me, though we hear about him at first, we think about him sometimes, and occasionally his name crops up in conversation, though not often any more. David left our house and went away.

Things changed for David, in David. Love will do that to you. David leaves our house, leaves Judith's house, but returns at night to watch her, returns in the daytime, day after day while Judith is with me at work, to check her mail, to trace her life. Aliens speak to him, direct him, convey him in their flying saucers, happy to help this little bit of dissolution. David finds the other men, tracks them down, shoots them, bang bang bang, head heart and balls, and then shoots himself, cleanly and sweetly, through the brain.

They are dead now, Judith mourns, all dead and gone. My lovers are all dead, and there's nothing to be done. Nothing I can do.

After that, what can one say? What can anyone say? What can any of us do? They're dead and gone, all of them, and Judith is still alive. Raymond, my Raymond, is beside himself with grief. Judith is distressed but strong. "Shit happens," she says through tears, and carries on. They are all dead, and she simply says, "Shit happens," and carries on.

We try and try to construct an explanation for the ways humans interrelate, for the phenomena of love and romance and it all comes down to a jostling around on the edges of the social world, the social whirl, the social whorl. Friends hesitate and lovers leave. Friends grieve and lovers die. Aliens watch us all, and wonder.

∞