

0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Conflicts

0.2 Conflicts

1 I Love You So Much, You're To Blame for Absolutely Everything

You and your partner are waiting, and waiting, at the airport carousel for your luggage. Other people are wheeling their bags away. Soon, you are the only ones left standing by the now empty conveyor belt. Gradually, a deeply unfortunate eventuality becomes clear: your case has gone missing, along with all your clothes and some important documents too. Even if it does turn up eventually, its going to mean lots of calls, explanations, forms, hanging around and uncertainty. The already long day has taken an unexpected turn for the worse.



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At this point, your partner says something about how strange it is that baggage doesn't get lost more frequently, given the number of cases travelling around the world at any one time. The tone is observational and curious, the sort one might employ when trying out a hypothesis about the progress of the seasons. It is followed by a silence. And, suddenly, you realise deep in your heart that you are completely furious with them, furious that they could be so carefree and indifferent and ploddingly standing next to you in their casually fashionable jacket, so not-in-pain, when something like this has happened to you. Moreover, an important piece of logic falls into place: somehow, all this, the waiting around, the humili-

ation, the hassle, the hapless airline employees you're going to have to deal with, this is their fault. They are to blame for everything even the headache that is right now clamping itself like a vice around your front lobes. You turn away from them and mutter, I knew all along that I should never have gone along with your selfish suggestion of this expensive, boring trip which seems a sad, and rather unfair way, to pass an otherwise pleasant anniversary weekend in a foreign capital.

Not everyone might quite see, or sympathise with, the connection just made. After all your partner does not work for an airline, is not involved in baggage handling and merely brought up the idea of a weekend away, to which you gave your mutual consent. Nevertheless, we are here circling one of the most superficially irrational, but common and important of all presumptions of love: that the person to whom one has pledged oneself is not just the centre of one's emotional existence, they are also, as a result, in a very strange, objectively insane and profoundly unjust sense, responsible for simply everything that happens to you, for good and ill.

The world upsets, disappoints, frustrates and hurts us in countless ways at every turn. It rejects our creative endeavours, it overlooks us in promotions, it rewards idiots, it neglects our talents, it delays our trains, loses our keys and sends our luggage off to far-flung destinations. And almost all of the time, we cannot complain. It's too difficult to tease out who is really to blame; or even if one knows, one cannot say, for one would lose one's job or be declared an upstart or impossibly thin-skinned.



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The only person to whom we can expose the multiple grievances we accumulate is the person who is closest to us; the one we love. This blessed person becomes the recipient of all of our accumulated rage at the injustice and imperfections of our lives. It is of course the height of absurdity to blame them. But this is to misunderstand the rules under which love operates. We simply cannot and therefore don't usually

get angry with the people who are really to blame for hurting us. Rather, we get angry with those whom we can be sure will tolerate us for blaming them. So we get angry with the very nicest, most sympathetic, most loyal people in our vicinity, the ones actually least likely to have harmed us, but most likely to stick around while we blame them for having done so.

The words we mutter to our lovers undoubtedly sound mean. But let's at least remember that we would say them to no one else on earth. They are a curious proof of intimacy, a symptom of love itself and in their own way, oddly romantic (a detail indirectly acknowledged by their frequently sexual conclusions). What relief it may be to end up in the company of someone with whom none of the rules of propriety apply, with whom one can reveal one's most deranged sides, whom one can accuse of a myriad of offences and yet by whom one could be sure that, once the storm has abated, one will be forgiven. We can tell any stranger something reasonable and polite, but only in the presence of someone we really trust can we dare to be properly irrational and truly unkind.

In part, we get furious with our partners because we assign them such a deep role in our lives. We have faith that a person who understands obscure parts of us, whose presence solves so many of our woes, couldn't realistically also be someone who would be unable to find a suitcase or in a wider sense fix our lives. Claims to this effect are confusedly interpreted as signs of a sadistic lack of affection and care and have to be punished accordingly (we want to make them as unhappy as it seems they have made us). We exaggerate our partners' powers, an exaggeration that is an echo heard in adult life down the decades of a child's awe at their parents. When we blame our partners, we are remembering what it felt like when we loved a parent who could effortlessly swing us up to the ceiling, who knew everything, who could find a rabbit when it got lost, who always held the tickets and the passports, who ensured there was invariably food in the fridge, who controlled the world... The partner, when loved, inherits a little of that beautiful, romantic, dangerous, unfair, trust we as children once had in our parents. At one level, the lover has learnt how to reassure the anxious child in us that's why we love them. But that source of strength also brings with it some very serious problems, for the primitive part of us insists on trusting them a little too much, believing that they actually control far more of existence than they possibly could.



On the other side of the fence, when faced with the outbursts of our lovers, we should strive (it is never easy) to remember that these attacks are deeply horrible symptoms of something really very nice: that we properly matter to another person, and that they have become deeply dependent upon us for their capacity to endure the humiliations the world daily accords them.

If we think of love as perfect agreement, we will feel that conflict must mean that a relationship is winding down or starting to fall apart. But blame is at heart just a symptom of an intensity of investment in another person. We attack because we have richly entangled our deepest dreams and anxieties with another person. It is because we are so very close to them, that they draw us into very private zones of turbulence and distress from which absolutely everyone else is excluded. That is one of the stranger, more unfortunate and yet (from a very calm angle) almost flattering gifts of love.