

Is your love doomed? Ask your friends!

What they can see that you can't. By Jennifer Baumgardner



I'm obsessed with critiquing my friends' relationships. I hate that I do it, and yet I must admit I'm insightful:

I can sense a bad vibe the minute I walk into a room. Or smell the condescension in a remark made by a friend's boyfriend *months* before she dumps him. Or correctly predict that the guy with the fake Rolex will bolt as soon as my friend outearns him. Truly, I'm quite prophetic...except about *my* love life—then it's like I'm wearing blinders and have been hypnotized by Tammy Wynette songs. (Date you for years, in spite of the fact that you've offended every one of my friends? I'd love to!)

Well, enough's enough. No more hooking up with men I'd instantly warn a friend to avoid. Here, for my reference and yours, a list of the stuff that makes me wag my bossy finger at my friends, so I can learn to take my own advice. I'm taping these pages to my bathroom mirror for daily reflection. Should you?

WARNING SIGN #1

You can't remember the last time you had sex

Years ago my friend Margaret*, now 35, introduced me to her blowhard boyfriend, Jerry, who kept his hand on her butt while she and I caught up. Later she confided that the sex was awful, wondering aloud if maybe she had vaginismus, a horrible vaginal-clenching syndrome. In reality all of her parts worked fine; she just couldn't bring herself to sleep with him. A week later she called: They'd gotten engaged. Of course, just before the invitations went out, they broke up.

To this day I'm still shocked by friends who don't see a

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sexless sex life as a major red flag. Take my friend Ramona, 33. When she and her ex, Carl, had less and less, and finally *no* sex, she reasoned to me, “Maybe sex just isn't that important. Maybe I've already *had* my sex life and I'll go sexlessly off into the sunset.” Since then she's wised up. “I was insane. I was 28! I just didn't believe that I'd ever find a guy I could love both in bed *and* out.” From Margaret and Ramona, I wish I had learned that always having a list of reasons

why you can't have sex is deadly. (Sadly, all I learned back then was the scary term vaginismus. Eek.)

WARNING SIGN #2

Your friends avoid you

Everyone assumes that single girls are the ones who call around on Saturday nights desperate for plans. But in my experience, it's Bad Couples whose friends, mysteriously, are always busy. Beware the shrinking social circle! Claire turned chilly on her best friend, Ana, because Ana's boyfriend was bigoted, sexist and obsessed with guns. “His excuse for every rude remark was that he was Southern,” says Claire, “as if civilized society can't exist below the Mason-Dixon line!” Claire and Ana's other friends couldn't even be in the same room with him. Ana finally did dump the guy over a racist remark, but other women insistently stick by their men. “I hate my friend Sarah's boyfriend so much that my friends and I made a pact not to hang out with her if he's there,” says Leah, 28. “Bad idea. Now she calls him her soulmate.”

I should have known that I was in a problematic relationship when my own brother-in-law didn't invite me to

LOVE QUICKIE “It is better to have loved a short man than never to have loved a tall.” —Writer Miles Kington

his birthday party for fear I'd bring my boyfriend. Ramona was savvier. "I stopped inviting Carl anywhere early on," she says. "Our public persona died long before our private one." Right before their breakup, she literally snuck Carl in and out of her apartment so that her neighbor friends didn't know he was still around. Not good.

WARNING SIGN #3
He has delusions of fame

Maybe I'm getting old, but if a friend tells me that her new love is a "really talented artist," I prepare for the postbreakup moment in which she tallies up all the dinners she paid for while he followed his muse. My neighbor Janet, 35, a social worker, once lived with a self-proclaimed "intelligent, super-creative" actor who was always out of work, mostly because he refused to actually audition. At the time I thought, he's no actor, he's watching *Oprah* and drinking her Diet Coke! Finally she caught on and coined a mantra I love: If he's been out of work forever, it's probably *not* because he's smart and talented.

WARNING SIGN #4
You're sticking it out for the furniture

You bought a sectional couch with him, so now how can you move out? Reasoning *that crazy* keeps some couples bonded. I winced when my friend Tina, 28, a music exec, admitted that her marriage to her husband is held together by their high rent. "We've had problems for a year," Tina told me. "But I can't afford to live alone, so I'm holding on." And I've heard this from my friend Allie, 32: "On bad

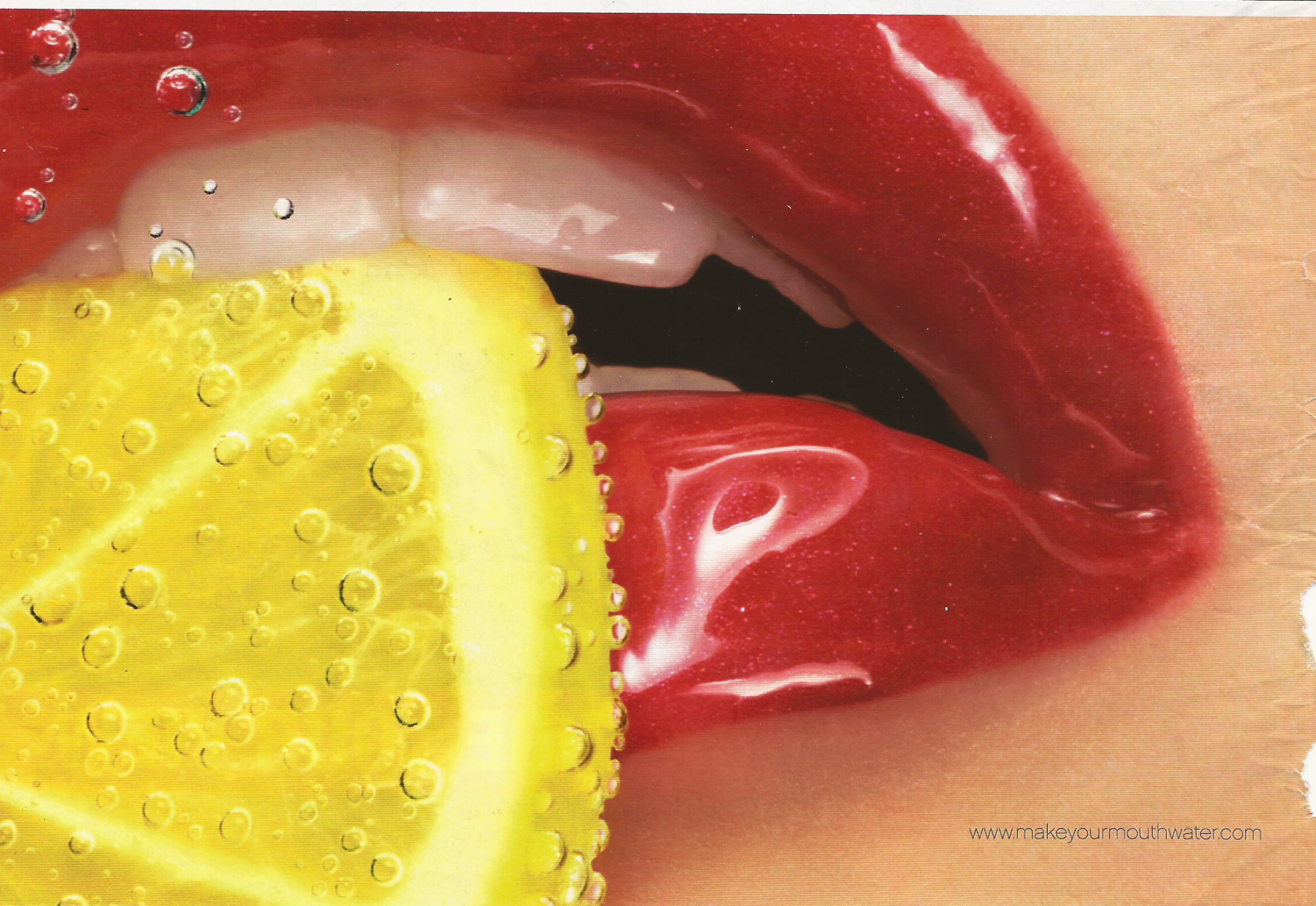
days, I've gone around our house mentally tagging stuff that's mine. But, to be honest, going through 15 boxes of books is more daunting than our misery." When friends admit these feelings, I think to myself: It's one thing to stay together for the kids, but the cutlery? In some cases a woman just can't give up the appearance of domestic bliss. "The worse things got in my friend Kristen's last relationship, the more she decorated," says Jennifer, 28. "She knew the guy was awful, but stayed for months." Ultimately it got so bad that Kristen had to regress and move in with her mom. "Only then did she realize she was happier without him."

“A string of bad gifts says: ‘I have no idea who you are, so here is a T-shirt.’”

WARNING SIGN #5
You dread his birthday (and yours)

There's a great Dar Williams song about lovers who give Christmas presents without cards—and break up soon after. A good gift (or a sweet card) makes you feel cherished and understood; a string of bad gifts says: "I have no idea who you are, so here is a T-shirt."

Janet, my neighbor, has spent her dating career waiting for someone who would make her feel special at Christmas. After years of bad gifts from bad boyfriends—including one who gave her a bunch of weird CDs he'd gotten free from his brother's indie record label—she wised up to the emotional importance of what's contained in wrapping paper. Recently Janet received an iPod from her current flame. "He may be the one," she told me, "not because I need a fancy present but because he really tried to get me something I'd love." I wish I'd been so thoughtful



when I bought a boyfriend 600-thread-count sheets. He looked at me the way 1960s wives must have looked at their husbands who gave them birthday vacuums. I think he knew I was more excited by the sheets than the sex.

WARNING SIGN #6

He can't be happy for you

At dinner once, I asked my friend LeeAnn, 37, what her boyfriend thought of the play she produced. "Oh, he's never seen it," she said. I nodded neutrally but thought: I give you three months. They lasted a little longer than that, then split because he was so threatened by her accomplishments. Your partner should be the first person with whom you want to share your victories, big and little, so if you can't because he's jealous, that intimacy dies. And Lord help you if you can't tell him your failures for fear he'll do a jig.

WARNING SIGN #7

You fight more than you don't

Even my most incompatible boyfriend had some nice qualities—why else would I have subjected my loved ones to him for a year? Grant was funny, a dynamo in bed, and he made great coffee. But we broke up when I realized only 10 percent of our time was spent on the good stuff—sex and *The Sopranos*—and 75 percent was spent angry. (We slept for 15 percent.) No amount of nookie makes up for nonstop fighting. Jill, 24, a waitress, quibbled constantly with her ex. "Looking back, I nitpicked because I wanted to leave and



He's smiling, she's smiling—that's a good sign!

didn't know how," she says. "After a few years of small fights, he did something big—he cheated. If only I'd listened to my friends earlier, I wouldn't have gotten so hurt."

Ah, clarity. So easy to find with a little perspective; so impossible when you're caught up in the heat of romance. Maybe, in addition to taping this list to my mirror, I'll make myself a little wallet note. I've seen it work. My sister's boyfriend was not a naturally talented kisser. So he wrote on a scrap of paper, "Lips first, tongue second," and tucked it into his wallet for daily review. Eventually he improved so much he became my brother-in-law. My wallet note will read: "If your best friend thinks he's an ass, he probably is." ©

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FRUIT GETS
SWEET
ON FIZZ

WITH NATURAL FLAVORS