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I've become a monster

The Romantic ideal states that we will be nicer to our partner than to anyone else in the world. We selected them because we liked them so much and will therefore bring our kindest and most gentle sides forward in the relationship. We'll be a lot nicer with them than with any of our friends, for example. We like the latter; we love the former.

But the reality is intriguingly and soberingly different. If things go to plan, we tend to become something akin to monsters in love. As Romantic Realism attests, we are likely to be significantly less kind to our partner than to almost any other human on the planet.

What explains our bad behaviour? Firstly, there is so much at stake. Our whole life is on the line. Friends are with us just for the evening; our mutual challenges may go no further than the need to locate a half-decent restaurant. But if things go well, the person we love becomes involved in some of the grandest and most complex matters we ever undertake: we ask them to be our lover, our best

friend, our confidant, our nurse, our financial advisor, our chauffeur, our co-educator, our social partner and our sex mate. With them, we set up a house, raise a child, run the family finances, nurse our elderly parents, manage our careers, go on holiday and explore our sexuality. The job description is so long and so demanding, no one in the standard employment market could conceivably deliver on even a fraction of the demands. The good lover needs to be a blend of therapist, PA, teacher, host, chef, nurse and escort. Asking someone to marry us turns out to be an impossibly demanding and therefore pretty mean thing to suggest to anyone we really want the best for.

Furthermore, it is the precondition of any long-term relationship that we cannot easily fire the partner and flee when issues arise. Many frustrating situations are rendered a great deal more bearable with the thought that we can escape them without too many penalties. But within long-term love, an irritant that exists now may have to be endured for many decades. A problem that would not have to be maddening in itself (a towel on the floor, a delay in answering, a chewing sound) can unleash catastrophic anxiety when we feel that this may be a more or less permanent feature of the one life we have been granted on this earth. At the backs of our minds, driving

our agitation during domestic struggles, is a simple, explosive thought: that the other person hasn't just done this or that thing that we find problematic; rather, they have ruined our lives.

We aren't monsters with our friends because they do not have the capacity to do us much damage. We might only spend a few hours a month with them. We don't care about them enough to be anything other than sweet with them. We need to care a lot about someone before we will be motivated to scream at them, slam doors on them, and call them a fucking cunt.

What further makes us monsters is that, in our agitated state, we don't say clearly and calmly what might be wrong. Instead, we lose our composure and scream, sulk and get bitter. We should, ideally, teach our partners how we feel and convey precisely why we have certain ideas in mind. But teaching requires a degree of calm indifference, which is in short supply amid the panic unleashed by the idea that our partner has ruined our lives. We end up far too anxious about our problems to begin to know how to fix them.

We are monsters too because we labour under the illusion that, on the whole, we are quite easy to live with – and,

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under such illusions, don't prepare our partners for the struggles they will have with us, or apologise readily enough for the damage we cause. We fall prey to a belief in our own normality because, when we are single, it can be hard to see where our crazy sides are located. When alone, at moments of fury, we don't shout, as there's no one there to listen – and therefore we overlook the true, worrying strength of our capacity for anger. Or we work all the time without realising how manically we use work to gain a sense of control over life, because there's no one calling us to come for dinner – and how we might cause hell if anyone tried to stop us.

It is only in close long-term relationships that problematic sides of us come into contact with, and clash against, the needs and expectations of another person – at which point it feels natural to blame the partner for being uncommonly tricky. We labour under the self-righteous belief that we are relatively reasonable and sound people to be with, if only we could find the right person.

Another alarming reason why we are mean to our partners is that we feel safe enough to be horrible to them. If we were so intemperate with our friends, they would soon

make excuses to stop seeing us. But with a partner, we are – below the surface – confident that they won't run away despite our tetchiness. Their loyalty makes them a safe target for our more distressed and desperate emotions. Love lends us the safety to show a partner who we really are – a privilege we would in truth be wiser and kinder never to share fully with anyone.

To edge us away from self-righteousness and fury, we should accept that we haven't come together with someone unusually incompetent; we're trying to do something unusually hard. We should blame the task, not our colleague.

We should cease, too, to be so priggish about our own characters. We are, naturally, appallingly difficult to live with. It's just that no one ever cared enough about us to tell us; our friends couldn't be bothered, our exes wanted to be rid of us without hassle; our parents were blind to our faults. But that doesn't mean we are paragons of virtue; we are necessarily offensive to anyone who has to experience us closely.

Fortunately, perfection is no requirement for love. We just need to be able to explain our imperfections in good

time, without pomposity, before we have hurt the other person too much with our madness. It is not an option for any of us to be more than mediocre. Acting foolishly and not-so-nicely is what we do for much of the time. By behaving badly, we are not deviating from the course; we are confirming our membership of the human race.