

She Says...

Stop With The Valentine's Schmaltz Fest!

Stuff the teddy bear with the cutesy message on his tum, burn the oversized satin card and bin the garage-bought roses, says Aoife Stuart-Madge. If he really cares, he'll steer clear of the most unromantic of love tokens

Call me a cynic, but I always get a sense of unease around Valentine's Day. It's not that I don't dig the flowers, the candlelit meals and the faint hum of Barry White in the air. Or the fact that it's the one day of the year that my kitchen-phobic husband actually offers to cook for me (Uncle Ben's Sizzle 'N' Stir four years running, thank you very much). In fact, now that it's no longer the cosmic kicking it was when I was a single girl, I am pretty much a sucker for the most romantic day of the year. What worries me, however, is how the people in charge are dictating romantic etiquette on what should be a private celebration. Yes, I'm talking about you, Hallmark. And their equation

for Romance™ looks like this: Pink + Fluffy = Swooning Female.

By flooding the market with huge teddy bears holding cutesy red hearts, oversized pink satin cards filled with bad poetry (surely you should be able to think of something nice to say all on your own?) and extremely flammable underwear, those crafty V. Day pushers are confusing the heck out of men – and let's face it, the poor sods are confused enough already.

You see, men are thrown off by the fact that women are predisposed to schmaltz. But just because we spend a disproportionate amount of our working day emailing each other pictures of cute kittens and we blubber at the *The Notebook* (yes, even after the 20th viewing), it does not mean that we are going to go ga ga for this tacky store-bought sentimentality.



Men are left wondering whether they need to shell out for that stuffed bunny with the outstretched arms that says 'I love you this much' to prove he's Casanova, while women are left praying they don't end up with something so crass as a touch-my-tum-to-hear-I-love-you toy, or worse, something crotchless and itchy.

Without trying to rain on cupid's parade or anything (though, I have to ask, should we *really* be taking relationship advice from a naked baby with a crossbow?), women get a bad rep for being overly mushy. We have a line, and once you've crossed the threshold between acceptable mushiness (think a Nicolas Sparks movie) into vom-inducing territory (stuffed animals bearing love declarations), turn back: you've gone too far.

The Cutesy Conundrum

In their defence, it's getting increasingly difficult for men to navigate the mall around Valentine's Day. They've had so much tat rammed down their throats that they genuinely can't tell the difference between a romantic gesture and a slap in the face waiting to happen. In the latter category, and among the many horrors stocking the shelves this year are a 'My last Rolo' gift box containing one measly chocolate ("Oh wow, you love me enough to give me a whole sweet? Be still my beating heart"); a red leather rose, which is only made worse by the boast on the box that it will 'never wilt'; and a pink 'love bell' you're supposed to ring when you want some, erm, physical attention. Gross.

Then there's personalised romance novels, in which you can give the heroine your partner's name (yes, really); personalised sandy beach photographs, where you can digitally scrawl their name in the sand or personalised books of love poetry, where you insert their name in each poem. The irony is you'd struggle to find anything less 'personal' than these soulless novelty items. Suffice to say, if I was gifted with any of the above, I'd tell him exactly where he could insert it.

Movie Moments

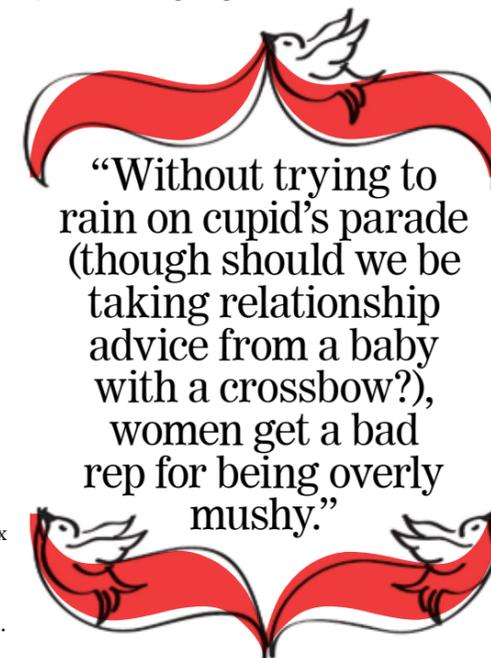
So what's a guy to do? Look no further than the Hollywood Grand Gesture for inspiration, I reckon. Rom-coms get blamed for giving women unrealistic

expectations of romance, but when you think about it, most of the movie moments that really make us melt are actually pretty ungrand, not to mention pretty inexpensive and simple to pull off in real life. John Cusack blasting *In Your Eyes* from his boombox at the end of *Say Anything?* Simple (if you use an iPod instead of a boombox, of course). Heath Ledger singing *Can't Take My Eyes Off You* to Julia Stiles in *Ten Things I Hate About You?* Easy. Andrew Lincoln holding up a note that says 'To me, you are perfect' for Kiera Knightley in *Love Actually?* A cinch – all you need is some plain white card and a permanent marker.

The point is, it doesn't take moves so big they could land you jail time to make an impact (see: running through the airport dodging security to declare love or pummelling a love rival half to death), it's just about finding a simple but sweet way to say 'You rock.'

Like the meal my husband makes for me every year, even though he has no idea how to cook. It's not the most complicated or even the most tasty of dishes, but it's special because he takes such pride in laying the candlelit table. And because he thinks he's 'adding his own twist' to a cook-by-numbers meal by using a different ratio of the 'sizzle' sauce to the 'stir' sauce than the one recommended on the jar.

So on Valentine's Day, I'll be content with this seemingly ungrand Grand Gesture. Unless John Cusack happens to show up outside my window with a boombox, that is... ■



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