



CAROLYN HAX

Taking the temperature of her heart

Adapted from a recent online discussion.

Dear Carolyn: My girlfriend borders on being too nice sometimes. Between work travel and visits to family, we haven't had a lot of alone time lately and had tentative plans to hang out — just us — this weekend. Now she's having two guests: her younger brother, who lives a couple of hours away, and a friend who's coming to the city for other reasons and needs somewhere to stay. Due to the size of her apartment, this pretty much means I can't stay there.

I love that she's so supportive of her younger siblings and so willing to help people out, but sometimes I wish she would just say "no" and put us (okay, ME) first. Am I overreacting?

Too nice

Doesn't sound like it, but "too nice" might involve some mislabeling. It's not "nice" to blow off one plan for another, certainly not without first consulting the companions in plan A. And if she really wants these visitors, it's not "nice" of her to act as if she couldn't say no (assuming that's what she did?) vs. admitting plainly, "I want to see my brother and friend."

You could be right, of course, that she's just a pushover. But if that's the case, then the question becomes, whom is it she's afraid to confront? On the surface, it might look like it's the brother and friend — the old, can't-say-no-to-someone-asking-a-favor problem.

However, it's also possible that she loves the drop-in guest thing, is excited to have visitors and doesn't have the spine to say to you, "I realize this weekend was going to be ours alone, but these two visits are a happy surprise."

If she had said that, then you'd be asking me a different question, along the lines of, "I'm getting the sense my girlfriend isn't all that into me — am I reading this right?"

So, maybe the best way to figure out what's going on is just to say to her, "I wish you would just say no and put our weekend plans — okay, me — first," or, even better, on the spot: "Hey, what about our weekend plans?"

Being honest about what you want is the only reliable way to answer the question you're really asking: whether this is about her warm and inclusive personality, or her lukewarm feelings for you.

Hi Carolyn: I just ended an eight-month relationship with a wonderful guy who was kind and fun, because we lacked that strong connection that allows people to talk and laugh together with ease.

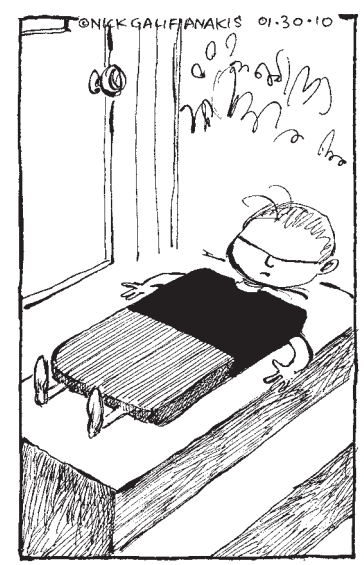
But now that I'm alone again, I'm starting to doubt if such a connection exists, and I'm second-guessing my decision. I wonder if I didn't give enough credit to his other great qualities (warm, active, outgoing, etc.). At the time, I thought our shared activities were getting us only so far, and that the ability to talk was more important. Now I'm torturing myself. How important do you think that intimacy is to a long-term relationship?

Second-guessing

Essential. To live, people need air, food, water, shelter. To have a fulfilling relationship, people need intimacy, trust, respect and compatible needs.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.



NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

THE STYLE INVITATIONAL



Higgledy piggedly, Pentti Airikkala, Road rally driver from Finland, has passed. Cancer defeated his Autoimmunity, Proving untrue that nice Finnish guys last.
(Brendan Beary, Great Mills.)

NEARLY BELOVED: HONORABLE MENTIONS

What a coincidence: singing our threnodies
Two weeks apart for a pair of Ted Kennedys.
One was the senator, lefty fomenting;
One, the old Maple Leafs' Hall of Fame center.
Here, then, a question that's ripe for debating:
Which Ted got farther in life through his skating? (Brendan Beary)

Porn star Marilyn Chambers
Marilyn Chambers arrives at the gates,
Where she's met by the leery Saint Peter.
"I plan to be meeting my maker," she states,
"But I'll settle for making my meeter." (Chris Doyle)

CBS's Don Hewitt
What Andy Warhol said of fame, Some think his words were true. It Seems most folks get one brief flash,
But not so Mr. Hewitt, Although you get a quarter-hour, Don's share wasn't fixed. He Took his 15 minutes' worth
And made it last for 60. (Dave Zarrow, Reston)

Pitchman Billy Mays
O'er the grave of Billy Mays Upon the granite shrine,

The year of death has been reduced
To 1999. (Rob Cohen, Potomac)
But That's Not All! Oh Wait, Yes It Is. (Malcolm Fleschner, Palo Alto, Calif.)
Al Bernardin, creator of McDonald's Quarter Pounder
I don't doubt your good intentions; Man's made many bad inventions.
The worst decline, the best increase:
I only pray you rest in grease. (Bob Reichenbach, Middletown, Del.)

Jeanne-Claude, wife and art partner of Christo
The Mass ran long for dear Jeanne-Claude
Since speakers found so much to laud.
Some mourners nodded, others napped,
But Christo sat there, simply rapt. (Chris Doyle)

Mary Travers to Form New Trio With Peter, Paul (Larry Yungk, Arlington)

Ed McMahon
For thirty years as Carson's mate, He got "Tonight" crowds ready.
How fitting that at Heaven's gate, St. John cried out, "Heeeere's Eddie!" (Barry Koch, Catlett, Va.)

Pitcher Mark "the Bird" Fidrych
Mark Fidrych lies beneath the ground
And rests in peace, at last interred.
A creature stirs and crawls around: The early worm that gets the Bird. (Chris Doyle)

Robert McNamara: Body Count Up by 1 (Russell Beland, Fairfax)

Ben Ali
The angels above are so glad to extol
All the virtues of Heavenly Ben's Chili Bowl.
The Devil below says it just isn't fair
Because Heaven's a hotter place now that Ben's there. (Kathy Hardis Fraeman, Olney)

Although we knew full well the end was near,
We still must bow our heads for Zorn's career. (Craig Dykstra)

Read more honorable-mention poems and headlines at www.washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational.

Next week: Going to the shrink, or Coming Subtractions

Online discussion Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational at washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 854: What's not to liken?

Men are like blenders: You need one, but you're not quite sure why.

Men are like mascara: They tend to run at the first sign of emotion.

As most everything quotable does anymore, a lot of zingy similes like the ones above have been zinging anonymously around the Internet; those were zung over to us by Invertebrate E-Mail Forwarder Peter Metrinko, who suggests that the Loser community should be able to produce even, you know, zingier ones.

This week: Produce one or more similes in any of the following categories: men; women; teenagers; dogs; cats; Facebook; coffee; "I."
Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives the classic Japanese easy-reader book "The Gas We Pass: The Story of Farts," which aims to educate children that it's okay, in fact desirable, to cut them regularly. Donated by Cheryl Davis.

Other runners-up win their choice of a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or yearned-for Loser Mug. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Loser Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fir Stink for their First Inks). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 8. Put "Week 854" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Feb. 27. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Larry Yungk; this week's honorable-mentions subhead is by Pete Morelewicz; the headline on this week's Web supplement, "Death Poetry Jam," is by Tom Witte.

The modest pleasures of the Davies Collection

ART REVIEW FROM C1

Standout collections tend to reflect the virtues of their collectors — at the Chester Dale show, for example, opening Sunday at the National Gallery, it's impossible to miss the moxie and ambition of the Wall Street wheeler-dealer who put it all together. But in this show, the Davies sisters, who inherited two-thirds of the coal and shipping fortune amassed by their Welsh grandfather, David Davies, leave an equally strong impression of an entirely opposite sort: modesty.

From our perspective, a century later and after several waves of liberation and emancipation, Gwendoline and Margaret (Daisy) Davies strike us as constrained and heartbreaking characters: lifelong spinsters, teetotalers, adherents of a strict Welsh brand of Calvinism modeled on the simple lives of 1st-century Christians. Oliver Fairclough, a curator from the National Museum Wales who came to Washington for the opening, called the sisters "cripplingly shy" — they never sought the company of the artists they collected, and they loathed personal recognition, lending their art and funding exhibitions with near-absolute anonymity. Although the sisters' fortune and rank in society would have allowed them entree into the world depicted by E.M. Forster or Henry James — they too traveled to Venice and kept a place in London — their quiet lives make the goings on of Golden Age novels appear implausibly racy.

Both received a healthy inheritance — 500,000 pounds each, which works out to about \$50 million dollars today, adjusted for inflation — but they seem not to have spent a farthing of it on the high life. Art, apparently, was their sole indulgence. Judging by the work here — the darker Daumiers; Monet's bird's-eye view of London Bridge, almost unrecognizable under a pink fog; a cinematic Millet of a distant lone countryman fighting a roaring wind; the sunlit Cézannes from his late Mont Sainte-Victoire phase — the Davies sisters' preferred territory was reflective self-effacement. With one stunning exception — a Renoir portrait of a young actress — they concentrated on that (nonalcoholic) 19th-century strain of art that found nobility in wistful romantic loneliness.



AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

A DIFFERENT WORLD: Van Gogh's "Rain — Auvers," bought after the sisters saw war close up.

In this context, the Renoir looks like a bold manifesto, a declaration of independence. A 16-year-old girl wears a bustled dress and dainty cap, all in a then-fashionable shade of indigo blue. The material is a lambent taffeta, and the paint handling is masterly in its offhand detail — Renoir was the son of a tailor and a seamstress. The girl, with her fawnish dark eyes directed at the viewer, looks like a young Anne Hathaway doing costume drama. She seems cosseted and dainty and assertive and determined all at once — a nice emotional match for a portrait that Renoir chose for the first impressionist show in 1874. Even 40-some years later the work still retained its air of rebellion — at least to a pair of wealthy Welsh spinsters.

At this late date, much of the juice has been wrung from impressionism; it's hard to make out the radical modernism in Monet's

rosiness or Renoir's soft focus anymore. This show, which measures the growth of the Davieses' confidence by the heft and adventurousness of their acquisitions, restores some of that original bravery. The sisters bought their first pictures at the age of 26 (Gwen) and 24 (Margaret), two atmospheric Corot landscapes purchased individually from the same gallery on successive days. The Corots led to some late Turners, modest in size but marked by his dramatic proto-Weather Channel preoccupations. Soon the buying spree gained momentum, and the sisters turned to the impressionists — Venetian scenes by Monet; a chilling Paris snowscape that Manet seems to have roughed in while on guard duty during the Franco-Prussian War. Like the painters they were drawn to, the sisters seem to be accessing new reserves of emotional directness.

Over time, the sisters seem to be accessing new reserves of emotional directness.

We'd never call it that today. The collection steers clear of the overtly shocking. There are no nudes, no slatternly dancers or mopey drinkers, no city scenes equating capitalist bustle with drab gray downpour. But given the consistency of the works, in tone and quality, the omissions do not feel like blind spots but articulate choices. When viewed together at the Corcoran, the sisters' narrow register becomes a strength, evidence of strong conscience and, to borrow a phrase from the era, fine sensibility.

You can see the conscience at work in what they bought (social critics like Millet and Daumier), in what they didn't buy (no louche Lautrec, no fauves, no faux-primitives), even in when they gave up buying. At the start of World War I, the sisters joined the London committee of the French Red Cross and crossed the English Channel to treat wounded soldiers, an experience that shook them profoundly. War expanded their consciousness: Gwendoline managed to make it into Paris on Red Cross business, and she used these occasions to slip away to buy art. This is when she bought the forthright and experimental Cézannes — two masterpieces, a stand of forest shimmering in the heat ("Provençal Landscape"), tectonic masses heaving their way toward a distant peak ("The François Zola Dam").

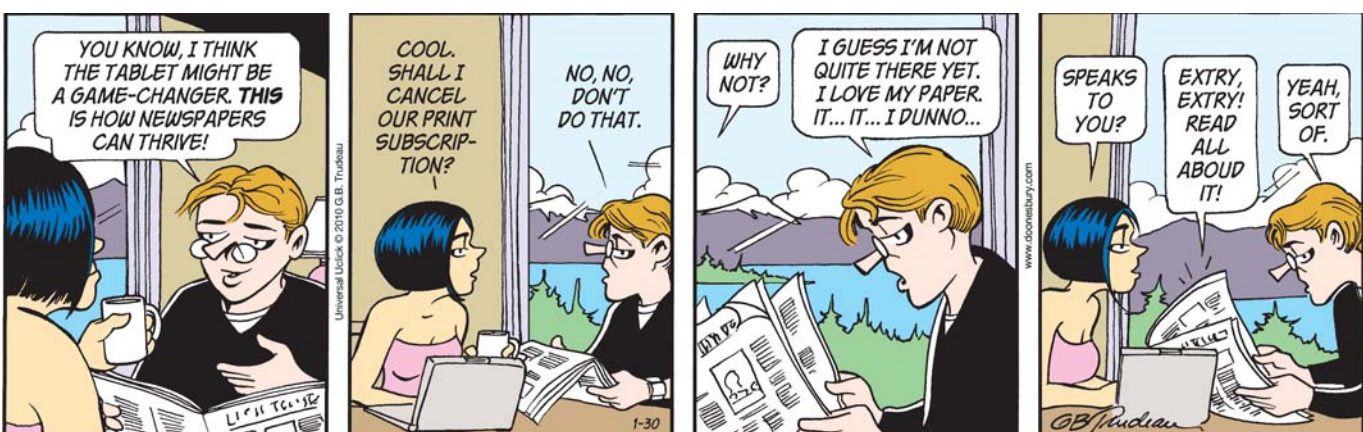
A few years after the war, the Davies sisters abandoned collecting to concentrate on more philanthropic efforts, including the League of Nations. One of their last significant acquisitions, bought in 1920, is a key to their changed worldview: "Rain — Auvers," a turbulent van Gogh wheat field, painted just weeks before his death, the tactile canvas scored with strong diagonal slashes indicating the deluge to come.

style@washpost.com

Conley is a freelance writer.

TURNER TO CEZANNE: MASTERPIECES FROM THE DAVIES COLLECTION, through April 25 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW. Call 202-639-1700 or visit www.corcoran.org.

DOONESBURY BY GARRY TRUDEAU



© 2010 GARY TRUDEAU