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Josephine Baker: Her Banana Dance Shocked Paris and Made Her a Star

Entertainer, spy for the French Resistance, civil rights icon, and adoptive mother of 12



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Josephine Baker posing in her famous banana costume from La Revue Nègre (public domain photo colorized by Olga Shirnina)

Josephine Baker was still a teenager when she caught the world's attention, and she held it for most of her life. She was a study in extremes: capable of great kindness and great cruelty, supremely confident onstage yet afraid of the dark. Much of what has been written about her, some of it by Baker herself, is either exaggerated or completely false. The following is the nearest I can come to the truth about this fascinating woman.

“She is like Salome. She has seven veils. If you lift one, there is a second, and what you discover is even more mysterious, and you go to the third, and you still don't know where you are. Only at the end, if you keep looking faithfully, will you find the true Josephine.” — choreographer George Balanchine in the book *Josephine Baker, The Hungry Heart* by Jean-Claude Baker



FPublic domain portrait of Josephine Baker colorized by Olga Shirnina

Josephine Baker was born Freda Josephine McDonald on June 3rd, 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Carrie McDonald, a domestic servant of African American descent. Although some sources list her father as drummer Eddie Carson, there's evidence to suggest that her father was a white man, possibly her mother's German employer. According to her unofficial adopted son and biographer Jean-Claude Baker, she always believed her father to have been white.

Josephine's mother was the adoptive daughter of former slaves, and she grew up listening to her grandmother's stories of the degradation and abuse that Black Americans endured under that system.

Child laborer, child bride



Josephine Baker onstage doing the Charleston (public domain)

Her family was poor, and, by the age of twelve, Josephine had dropped out of school to work as a waitress at the Old Chauffeur's Club. There she met Pullman porter Willie Wells, whom she married at the age of thirteen. The couple divorced within a year.

Josephine joined and danced with the Jones Family Band, a street entertainment group. She married again in 1921 at age of fifteen to Willie Baker. Carrie disapproved of Josephine's show business aspirations and urged her to settle down and take care of her husband. Instead, when her vaudeville troupe got a booking in New York City, Josephine left her husband and became a Broadway chorus girl.

Playing the "pony"

Josephine divorced Willie Baker in 1925 but continued to use his name professionally. She was a chorus girl in *Shuffle Along*, *The Chocolate Dandies*, and other shows.



Her specialty was to act as the "pony," a term for a comic bit where the last chorus girl in the line behaves as if she doesn't know the dance and keeps messing it up. In the end, she surprises the audience by performing flawlessly and with great precision.

Josephine was clever enough to realize that playing the fool on the stage set her apart from the other dancers. It elevated her position and made her performance

more memorable to audiences. Soon, Josephine Baker was the highest-paid chorus girl on Broadway. The strategy was what put her on the path to her stardom.

The toast of Paris

Josephine Baker in a comic performance of the Charleston (via YouTube)

*“I didn’t get my first break on Broadway. I was only in the chorus in *Shuffle Along* and *Chocolate Dandies*. I became famous first in France in the twenties. I just couldn’t stand America and I was one of the first colored Americans to move to Paris.” — Josephine Baker in The Guardian, 1974*

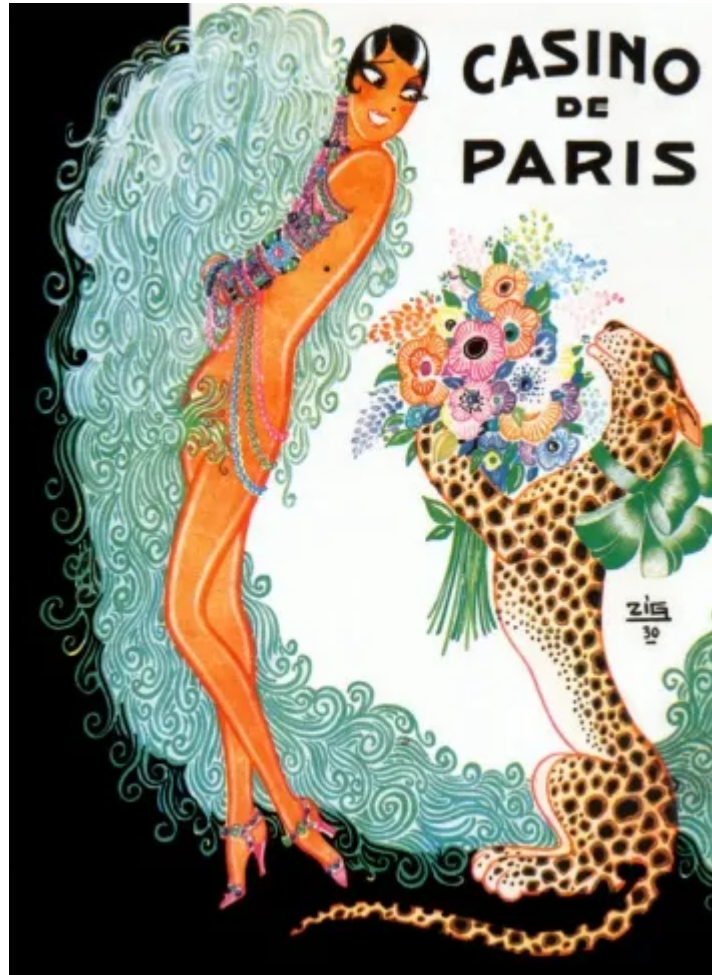


Joe Alex and Josephine Baker in the performance that made her a star, *The Danse Sauvage* in *La Revue Nègre*, Paris 1925 (public domain)

Baker got her big break at the age of nineteen when she took on a starring role in *La Revue Nègre*, a musical comedy show featuring an all-black cast. She set sail for Paris with her fellow performers on October 2, 1925. The show premiered at the [Théâtre des Champs-Élysées](#) and took Paris by storm.

The French had been introduced to jazz music by Black American soldiers serving in World War I, but Baker's show was Europe's first widespread introduction to jazz dancing. Despite the comic elements in Baker's routines, her dancing was pure sensuality. The crowd went wild.

“She is in constant motion, her body writhing like a snake or more precisely like a dipping saxophone. Music seems to pour from her body. She grimaces, crosses her eyes, wiggles disjointedly does a split and finally crawls off the stage stiff-legged, her rump higher than her head, like a young giraffe.” —review of *La Dance Sauvage* by critic Pierre de Régnier



Promotional poster of Josephine Baker and her pet cheetah by “ZIG” aka Louis Gaudin, 1930 (public domain)

After an enormously successful run in Paris, Baker toured Europe with the show. When she was offered her own headlining production at the *Casino de Paris*, she broke her contract and returned to Paris where her shows set a new standard. Her pet cheetah Chiquita, sporting a diamond collar, was part of her act.

The toast of Paris, she modeled for Picasso and partied with Ernest Hemingway, who called her “the most sensational woman anyone ever saw.” With the encouragement of her new manager and lover Giuseppe Pepito Abatino, she studied voice and began a singing career. Her biggest hit of the period was 1931’s “J’ai deux amours.” Singer Dame Shirley Bassey cited Baker as her primary influence saying, “I swear in all my life I have never seen, and probably never shall see again, such a spectacular singer and performer.”

Film stardom and disappointment



1936 revival of Ziegfeld Follies on Broadway generated less than impressive box office numbers, and later in the run, she was replaced by Gypsy Rose Lee for the film Princesse Tam-Tam, 1935 (public domain)

Baker starred in three European films: *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), *Zouzou* (1934), and *Princesse Tam Tam* (1935). In 1936, Baker was invited to star in a revival of Ziegfeld Follies on Broadway. She hoped her return to the United States would be triumphant, but it was a major disappointment.

The show didn't do well at the box office, and she got terrible reviews. *Time* magazine called her a “negro wench” and criticized her performance as unimpressive. She was replaced in the show by stripper Gypsy Rose Lee.

Baker was heartbroken by the negative reception she received in her home country. She returned to France in 1937 and surrendered her American citizenship to become a citizen of France.

In truth, France was a more agreeable environment for a Black woman as there was no segregation. She was welcomed as a customer in shops and dined in any restaurant she chose without being harassed or threatened.

All in for France

The same year, Baker married French industrialist Jean Lion. In 1939, Baker fled Paris for Château des Milandes, her home in the south of France, due to Germany's invasion of France. She assisted Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement by storing weapons, housing resistance fighters and obtaining them visas.

“France made me what I am. I will be grateful forever. The people of Paris have given me everything... I am ready, captain, to give them my life. You can use me as you wish.” — Josephine Baker offering her services to Free France



Josephine Baker was given the honorary rank of lieutenant in the Free French Air Force (fair use)

As an entertainer, Baker was able to move more freely across borders than the average citizen. As a result, she delivered information to neutral countries like Portugal and arranged for them to be transmitted to England. She wrote messages regarding airfields, harbors, and German troop concentrations in France in invisible ink on her sheet music.

Baker also attended ministry and embassy events, using her charm to get people to share useful information to pass along to her contacts.

This dangerous espionage work could have easily led to her arrest and execution, as it did for Dutch spy Mata Hari in the previous World War. Yet, Baker was determined to do whatever she could for the country that had been so good to her.



Josephine Baker distributes rations to the citizens of Paris. Photo courtesy of Gallica Digital Library.

At the end of World War II, General Charles de Gaulle awarded Baker the *Croix de Guerre*, the *Rosette de la Résistance*, and named her a *Chevalier de Légion d'Honneur*, France's highest order of merit for military and civil action. Conditions in France after the war were harsh. Baker sold some of her jewelry and other items to help in the relief efforts and volunteered to distribute rations.

The Rainbow Tribe



Josephine Baker with 10 of her 12 adopted children in Amsterdam, 1964 (Source: National Archives of the Netherlands)

Baker had divorced Jean Lion shortly after the war began. In 1947, she married her fourth husband, composer and conductor Jo Bouillon. During the 1950s she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and began adopting children of different races and religions. (She was never able to have biological children.)

Baker's family functioned as a social experiment and demonstration of racial and religious harmony. She called her children her Rainbow Tribe and installed them at her château, a 15th-century castle with extensive gardens and grounds in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region. There was a motel, a bakery, cafes, a jazz club, a miniature golf course. There was even a wax museum on the property telling the story of Baker's life.



Josephine Baker with her husband and some of their children, 1956. From left to right: Luis, 3, from Columbia; Jean-Claude, 1, from France; Jeannot, 1, from Korea; Jarry, 1, from Finland; Moïse, 1 1/2, Israeli (actually from France); and Akio, 3, from Japan.

While her children were school-aged, she charged admission to the grounds so that people could observe them playing peacefully together. The children also sang for paying guests. To perfect her vision, Baker made some alterations in some of her children's backstories. Unable to obtain a child from Israel, she adopted a French boy, renamed him Moïse (Moses), and raised him in the Jewish faith, according to [Matthew Pratt Guterl](#), author of *Josephine Baker and the Rainbow Tribe*.

As the children aged, interest in visiting the estate waned. Bouillon became fed up with being the caretaker of the estate and single parent to their ever-expanding family while his wife went on tour. She separated from him in 1957 and they divorced in 1961. He went to live in [Buenos Aires](#). Baker lost her estate in 1969 and had to be physically removed from the premises.

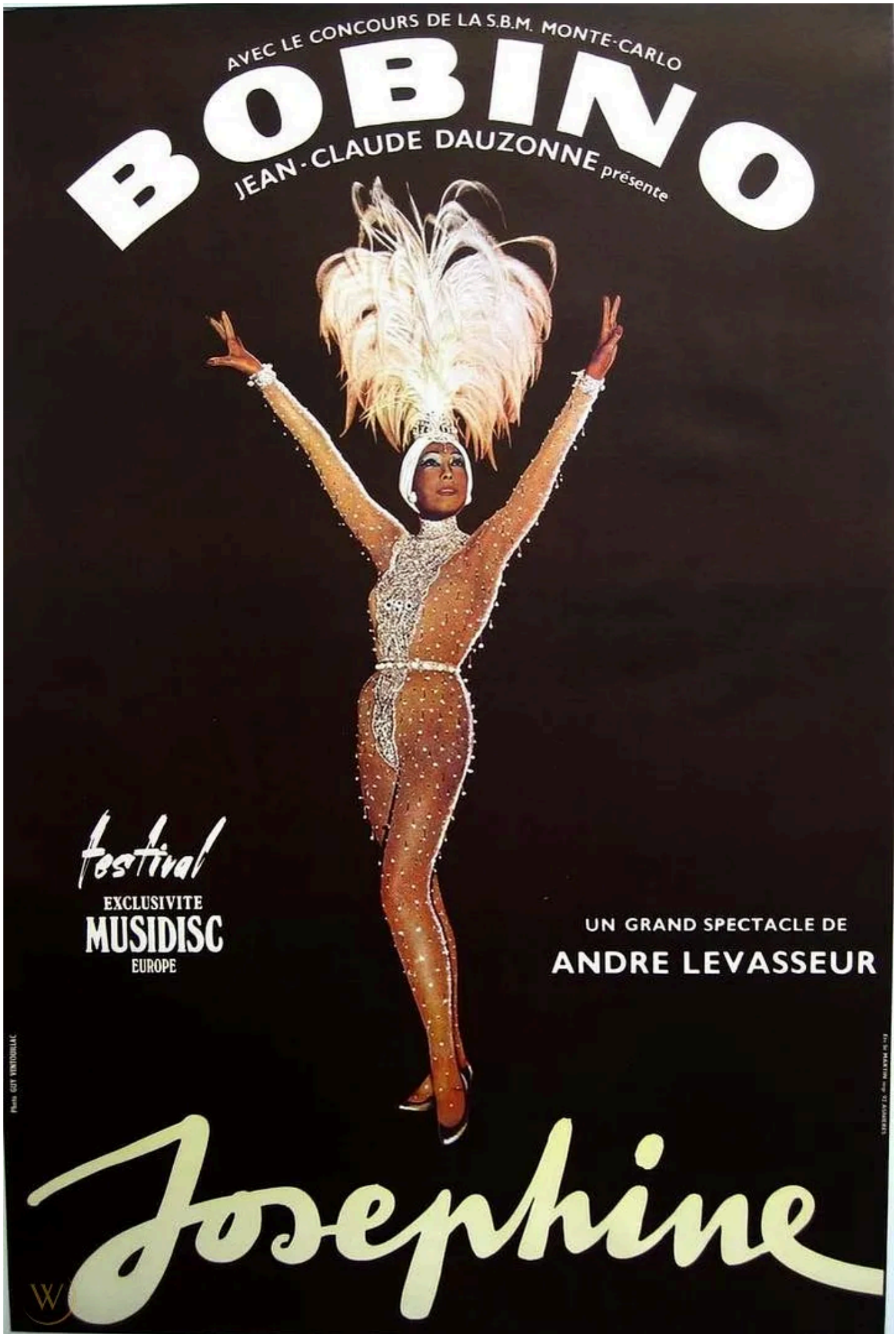
Last days and aftermath



Josephine Baker with longtime friend Princess Grace, the former actress Grace Kelly (fair use)

After Baker lost her estate and her children entered their teens, the family began to break up. Princess Grace gave Baker a place to live in Monaco and some of the children went with her there. Two of them went to live with Bouillon in Buenos Aires, including Jarry who Baker threw out of the house when she discovered he was gay. Some of the other children went to live with one of Baker's fans in the United Kingdom.

Sadly, Baker eventually became estranged from most of her children. They resented how she had put them on display and attempted to micro-manage their lives, detailing life plans and future professions for each of them. None of them followed the plans she had devised.



Poster for Josephine Baker's final performance, 1975 (Image via worthpoint.com)

Princess Grace and former First Lady of the United States Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis financed a comeback show for Baker in Paris in 1975. The star-studded opening night audience included Sophia Loren, Mick Jagger, Shirley Bassey, Diana Ross, and Liza Minnelli.

A few days into the show’s run, Baker died of a stroke on April 12, 1975. She was found in bed in her apartment surrounded by newspapers featuring reviews of her performance.

Josephine Baker is buried at the Cimitière de Monaco. She was the only American-born woman to receive a funeral with full French military honors.

The German magazine Der Spiegel interviewed two of Baker’s adult children in 2009. Jarry said, “She was too possessive. We weren’t allowed to develop the way we wanted to.” Akio was more diplomatic, he said, “She was a great artist, and she was our mother. Mothers make mistakes. Nobody’s perfect.”

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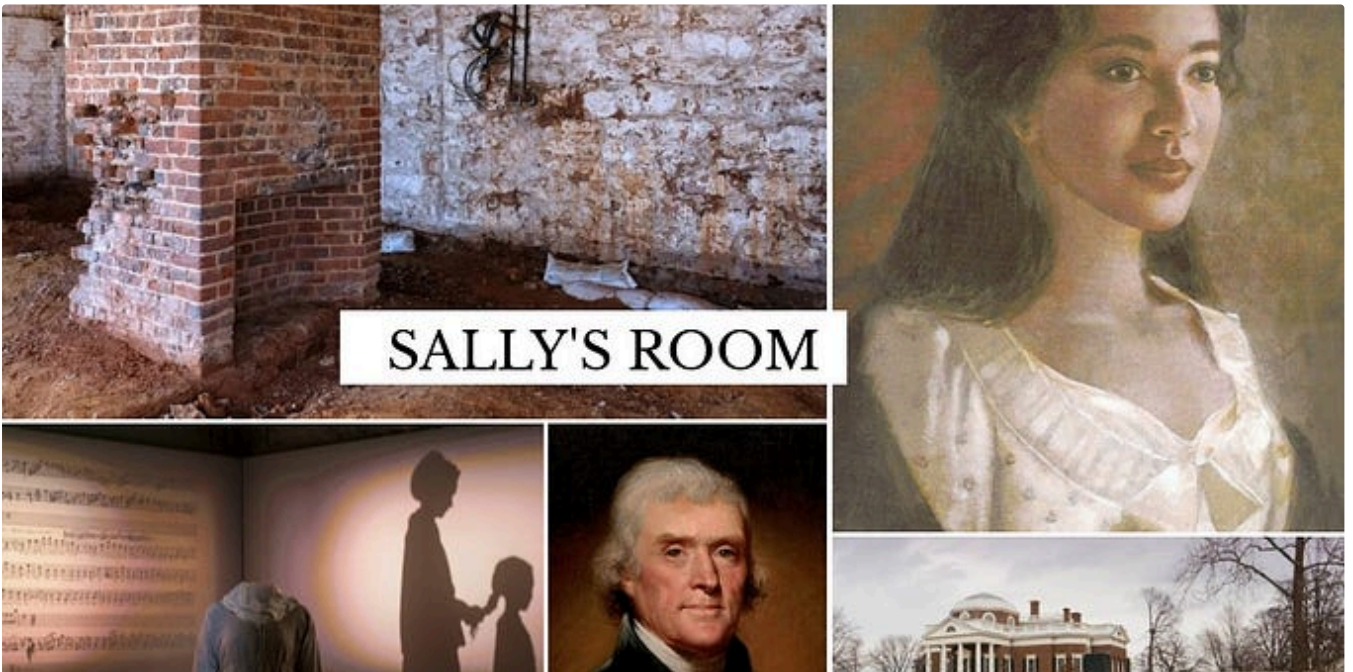


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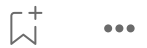



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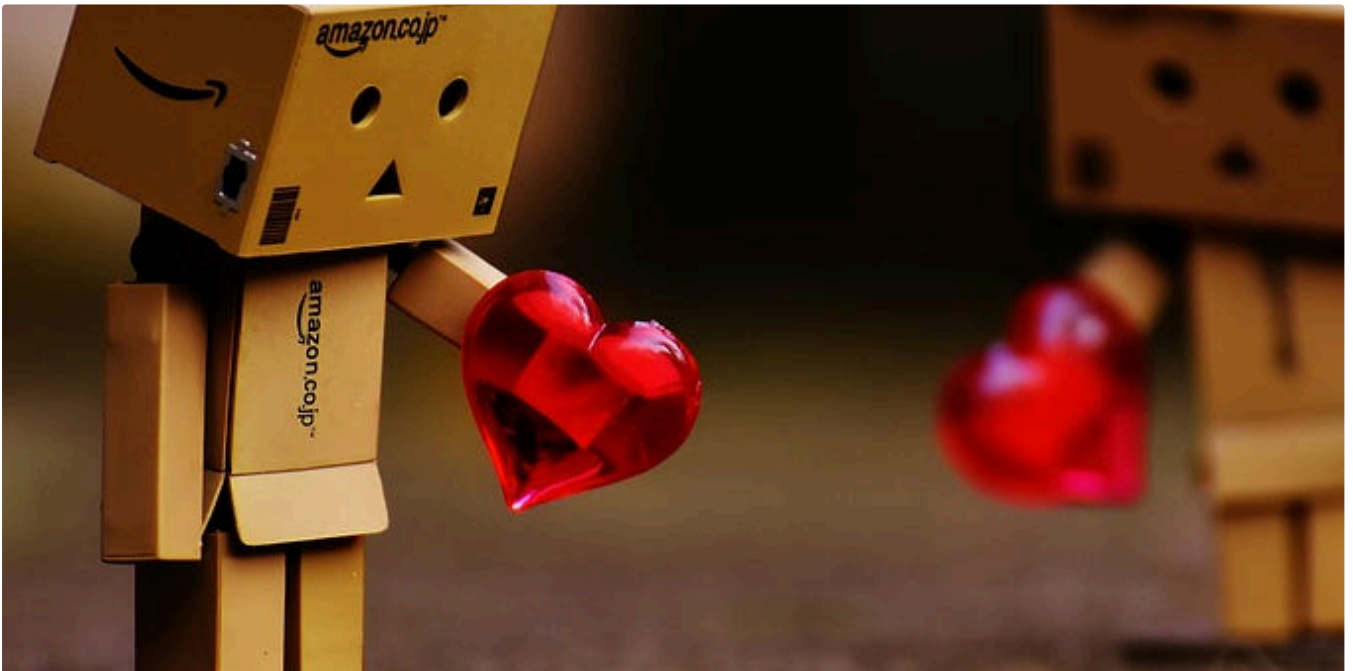


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