

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

ARE SPARKS FLYING IN YOUR HOUSE?

How to mix a relationship and home repairs

Shortly after my mate and I set up house-keeping together, I plugged a lamp into the wall in our newly painted front hall. Immediately sparks flew from the socket, and it gave a quiet burp before emitting a small plume of smoke. I heard the refrigerator gasp, the television go mute, and my partner's voice from another room: "What'd you do *now*?"

Had I been living alone, I would have lived without light for the remainder of that Sunday night. Luckily, my mate understands, as I do not, that electricity isn't something that flows in an unbroken line from the sky to the utility company to my hair-dryer. In fact, he is knowledgeable in almost every area of household repair work, which he claims is essential for anyone who lives with *me*. Unfazed by darkness that Sunday evening, he went to work and repaired our electrical damage in time for me to watch Mike Wallace make mincemeat out of yet another poor schnook.

I hadn't fully realized until then that sharing your home with a man means sharing your leaky faucets with him, too, and that it takes more than twigs to keep your love nest in order. *One* of you has to know that a washer can be something other than a machine that cleans clothes, and that a circuit breaker doesn't fall into the same category as a windbreaker. Otherwise, you could wind up like Sally and Josh, whose combined household repair know-how would fit on the head of a nail. The only thing in their house that Sally knows how to fix is her makeup, and Josh thinks that a dowel is something women's fathers once forked over to men in order to get their daughters married. Neither of them has the faintest idea where their fuses are, let alone how to change one, so that they are often obliged to eat candlelight dinners consisting of melted ice cream soup from their room-temperature freezer.

I had no sexist expectations about a man taking on all the household repair jobs: When I was growing up, it was my *mother* who kept all our appliances in line, as if she were a lion tamer and they were the lions. My father was about as handy around the house as the school hamster I took home for Christmas vacation, who promptly got lost somewhere in the heating system. The one time my dad tried to fix a leaky water pipe, he turned our basement into a fairly authentic

replica of Okefenokee. Unfortunately, along with his blue eyes, I inherited his ineptitude, so it came as a happy surprise to find that my partner is as good at making a lamp light up as he is at making *me* light up.

Now we've developed a form of teamwork when it comes to household repair jobs, each of us contributing our relevant skills. He, an excellent plumber, electrician and carpenter, does all the plumbing and electrical work, and periodically planes down the bathroom door to prevent it from sticking and holding me captive. I, an excellent shopper, do my share by shopping for toilet-bowl float balls and flanges (whatever *they* are). I can often be found hanging out in plumbing supply stores—me and several burly men who look like they each ate a cow for lunch and stare at me as if I'd just dropped in from Mars.

This sort of shared responsibility also works well at my friend Amy's house. Amy is the only woman I've ever met who knows the meaning of the word "rheostat," while her husband, a plastic surgeon, thinks it's okay to take a hair-dryer into the bathtub. (Amy implies that his one attempt to change a light bulb in their house resulted in the city-wide blackout of '77.) Realizing their respective strengths, they've worked out an unwritten agreement regarding household maintenance work: Amy is responsible for wiring lamps and fixing doorknobs and Bud is responsible for financing the work by wiring jaws and fixing noses.

Without a shared sense of responsibility, you are likely to find yourself in one sort of difficulty after another, as did my friends Sarah and Charles. Sarah, a woman who starts to stutter if she has to say the words "clogged drain," complained that Charles, who can charm the water out of a faucet when he wants to, practically had to be blackmailed into picking up a wrench. Finally, after Sarah tried to fix a leaky shower head and their home floated two blocks south, she gave Charles his choice: He could either 1) do the repair work around the house himself, or 2) take a second job to pay for the steady stream of professional repairmen who charge roughly the same amount of money for their time as extortionists do for *theirs*, or 3) leave the tasks to Sarah and take out more flood insurance. Eventually, Charles chose to do the jobs himself, and put Sarah in charge of changing his drill bits and calculating their savings in professional fees, thereby sharing the work.

Chances are that you and your partner also can work out a way to share the household repair jobs. After all, you worked out a way to share the bathroom.

by Bette-Jane Raphael