

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

CAN YOU REMODEL A MAN?
It's risky—even though he'd be so much better off your way

I don't know one woman who doesn't wish she could change her partner at least a little bit. I've seen hopes for changes that range from the relatively minor—"I wish I could get him to stop calling my mother 'Toots'"—on up to the relatively ambitious—"I wish I could get him to give up the violin and become an attorney."

This is because men are funny about change. They can accommodate huge changes better than small ones. They can change their sex, move from the frozen tundra to the equator, quit jobs as engineers to become songwriters. But give them grapefruit juice instead of orange juice one morning and they're ready to kill you. Moreover, they tend to resent your telling them that not *everything* they say and do is sheer perfection, especially if that was what you implied you believed when you first met them. And they see no reason to change the way they thought and behaved for the twenty or thirty years they lived before meeting *you*. That's fair enough, I suppose. Nobody likes to think of himself as a "before" in a makeover. I know I felt snappish when, on a first date with a man, he asked me if I'd ever thought of wearing my hair differently. "Maybe I'll wear it like yours," I said.

Another thing to remember is that men seem much more open to change when they instigate it themselves. Which is why a man whose idea of tidy surroundings was formed in a high school locker room is not going to stop leaving your bedroom in approximately the same condition just because you yell yourself blue in the face every morning. It is also the reason why he is more likely to resent than be chastened by your tactic of calling him up wherever he happens to be just so you can ask to speak to "the slob."

I've found that trying to change anything about the man I live with—from his politics to his socks—is like trying to move the Great Wall of China to a new location (Yosemite, say) and has roughly the same chance of success. Once, way back at the beginning of our relationship, I suggested that he might look nice in a bow tie for a change, and from the way he looked at me you'd have thought I'd suggested he wear it in his hair.

Here's my friend Susan's philosophy re-

garding men and change: "What you see is what you get!" Her feeling is that you're not going to change a Stanley Kowalski into a Noel Coward—or vice versa—no matter how determined or energetic you are. Her own attempts at loosening up her husband's ingrained modesty have been less than triumphant: "He still gets dressed to go skinny dipping."

My friend Sally spent six years with a man as talkative as the bust of Napoleon he kept on his desk. She tried and tried to get him to be more communicative. She wasn't asking for a Merv Griffin, you understand. She just wanted him to talk to her once in a while for reasons other than necessity. ("Where's my record cleaner?" "We need more collision insurance," etc.) She finally gave up after learning that he'd changed his career—from welder to guitarist—and hadn't bothered to mention it for several months.

All this isn't to say that there haven't been women who've succeeded in changing their men. There was my Aunt Ellen, for one, who hated my Uncle Frank's habit of tracking sawdust onto her clean kitchen floor when he came home at night from working in a butcher shop. She harangued him about this for years and finally did get him to stop. In fact, he stopped coming home at all.

Then there's my friend Edith, who, shortly after moving in with her lover, Michael, put her foot down regarding his late working hours. He was not to stay out late working anymore, she told him, and he stopped. Now he stays out late seeing other women.

These success stories aside, however, the fact is that changing a man in any fundamental way is an iffy business, at best. (I know one woman who told her boyfriend he should change his life drastically, and the first change he made was to get a new girlfriend.) Oh, you can probably affect some external changes easily enough: Get him to wear his hair a little longer than a sixteenth of an inch from his scalp or a little shorter than Beethoven; have him exchange a few of his "Coors Beer" tee shirts for a couple of nice sport shirts; get him to try spaghetti with a white sauce instead of a red one, or cheese that doesn't come sliced and wrapped in cellophane (although he believes that anything his mother didn't serve him is unhealthy). But even these kinds of changes can backfire on you. My friend Nancy, for example, recalls how hard she worked to get her husband more interested in his appearance. And he became a snappy dresser, all right, to the point where Nancy now reports there is no longer any room for *her* clothes in their closets.

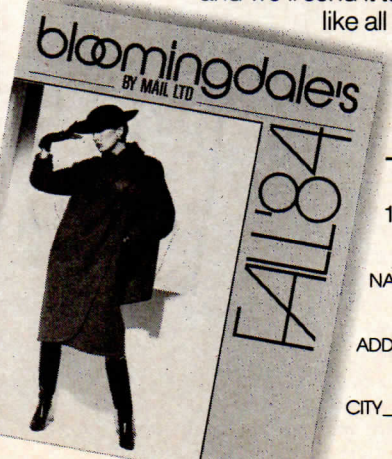
So it's probably best to try and fall in love with a man whose shortcomings you feel you can live with if you absolutely have to—because you probably will.

by Bette-Jane Raphael

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