

## ROMANTIC PERILS OF THE TWO-CAREER RELATIONSHIP

Men bring their jobs home with them more often than they bring flowers. Their wives and girlfriends listen to tales of bosses who sound like penal colony superintendents, endure bad tempers engendered by the news of somebody's unearned rise to Vice President for World-Wide Distribution (of rug tacks) and sit on the receiving end of conversations that sound less like dialogue than dictation. Now, however, the prevalence of the two-career couple has both partners bringing jobs home, doubling this particular threat to a happy home life.

The fact is that carting the problems or attitudes you have at work over your threshold every night is liable to put a strain on your relationship. (It's rumored that even the unflappable Nancy Reagan once slammed her napkin down on the White House dinner table and told Ronnie that if he complained one more time about "those pesky Ruskies" she'd scream.) Your partner wants to hear "Darling, I'm home," when you walk in the door, not grumblings about the idiot administrator who still thinks women only work for "pin money," or the co-worker whose recent promotion followed suspiciously close upon the heels of her marriage to the son of your firm's biggest client. Nor does he want to feel, no matter how swamped you are at work, that coming home to him is just one more onerous assignment.

It's that last attitude that often seems to invade the atmosphere at my friend Sue's house. Sue reports that when her husband is feeling put upon at work, he begins to see her as just another agent of his oppression. At those times he's likely to greet her reminder of that evening's dinner engagement with a harassed "I'm under enough pressure! Why do we have to see those people?" Whereupon Sue feels it is her duty to point out that referring to his sister and her husband as "those people" bespeaks a certain want of family feeling. (She has also been known to request, when things get really tense, that he remember there *is* a difference between their apartment and his office other than the size of their computers.)

When my own partner is under pressure at work, I've found it best to behave as if I were living in a library. I adopted this admittedly defensive attitude after realizing that, when the heat is on, no topic of polite conversation is going to make *him* polite. The mention of an interesting new movie is met with: "Don't think you're going to go with me!" An innocent "Wasn't it a nice day today?" receives a brusque "How would I

know?" And an inquiry as to what he might like for dinner earns the accusation that I am trying to strangle him (which, at that moment, sounds like an attractive suggestion).

Even those who remain pleasant under fire can threaten their relationships by bringing home a style of relating that their jobs demand but that their partners could live without. This was the case with a friend of mine who's married to a nursery school teacher. He tells me that after months of having her ask him if he'd washed his hands before dinner or if he'd used the bathroom before taking a car trip, he struck back. He started addressing her as Mrs. Harrison and raising his hand and waving it in her face whenever he wanted to speak. This became embarrassing, especially at dinner parties, and eventually his wife got the point.

I wish I could find an equally effective way to keep my partner, a crackerjack trial lawyer, from perpetually treating me like a defendant under the English system of justice: guilty until proven innocent. Every chair in our apartment has done duty as a hot seat. Every question he asks me is a *trick* question and contains a reference to some prior offense. For instance, he does not ask "Shall I get tickets to the club dance next week?" What he asks is "Shall I get tickets to the club dance next week—or are you going to make a fool of yourself again and dance the Charleston with the head waiter?" (This is not a question that can adequately be dealt with by a simple "yes" or "no.")

Still, I wouldn't trade places with my friend Marilyn, whose husband is a police detective known to have once used surveillance equipment to ascertain whether his in-laws had left their apartment. If I often feel like a defendant, Marilyn says she often feels like a "perpetrator." Dick once conducted a stakeout on his own toddler in order to find out if the new baby sitter Marilyn hired was up to his standards. (She wasn't.) When I complain about my own situation to Marilyn, she asks if I'd prefer to cook a meal and then try to eat it while listening to dinner conversation that revolves around the details of a drug-related family massacre. Or how I'd like to go out for dinner—or even do some shopping—with a man who always has to face the cash register.

Marilyn and I both sympathize with our mutual friend Nancy, whose actor husband brings his onstage roles home to the less than spacious theater of their studio apartment. Nancy reports that last year he played a Russian immigrant and would sit over dinner with his brows knit together, ominously mumbling something in Slavic tones that Nancy finally figured out was "Mares eat oats and does eat oats. . . ." She says she was relieved when he tried out for, but did not get, the title role in *Alien*.

In summation, I think it's important not to treat your partner like a grievance committee of one, not to come home intoning a litany of unfair labor practices and not to bark out orders in a voice designed to be heard above the noise of a typing pool. I further think that, if you remember all these things, your partner may find that loving you isn't such a tough job after all.

by Bette-Jane Raphael