

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

## COUPLES WHO SHOP TOGETHER... must be crazy

Ours is a consumer society. Everybody shops. But not everybody should shop with her partner. I know I shouldn't, not unless I want it to be the last thing we do together for forty-eight hours.

My mate feels the same way. In fact, he says that he would almost rather walk down the aisle of a church with me than walk down the aisle of a department store. (Almost, but not quite.) He is nothing if not decisive. When it comes to buying clothing, for instance, he is so sure of his size and style requirements that he buys his shoes by mail. I, being a much less decided shopper, would as soon buy my shoes by mail as I would my dinner.

My partner says that what I do in a store is not called shopping, but prospecting. If I pause on my way to the curtain department to rummage through an interesting display of place mats, diving into the pile as if being sucked under by quicksand, he asks if I've spotted a nugget. Because of my tendency to get distracted, he complains that going shopping for a table with me requires him to take a leave of absence from work. His impatience surfaces the moment we step into a store together, when he usually hisses a reminder in my ear that we are there to buy something, not to take inventory. His attitude tends to make me hostile, nervous and even more unsure of what I want. This is probably why the last thing we actually purchased together was a flag, on the occasion of America's Bicentennial.

Like me, my friend Annie compares walking through a store with her mate to walking through a bed of hot coals. This is because Peter has no patience with Annie's difficulty in spending money. Taking her to a store, he says, is no bargain. Whenever they go to buy something together, he complains that she behaves as if every penny spent is a friend lost, and as if handing over dollar bills were the same as handing over, one by one, the hairs on her head. Annie defends herself by saying that *somebody* in their household has to show some fiscal responsibility, since Peter's idea of spending makes Imelda Marcos look like a tightwad. His carefree buying habits would leave them no money for food, she maintains, if she didn't constantly remind him that you can't cut your bills into strips and serve them as linguini. They now halve their shopping responsibilities: Peter buys things, and Annie returns them.

For some couples, being in a store

together triggers hostilities. Janice and her husband have their worst fights while shopping, and as a result, Janice believes that any woman who goes looking for clothes in the company of her mate should also be looking for psychiatric help. Sometimes arguments start with a minor, derogatory aside by one about the other's fashion choices, as in, "You know, you and Daniel Boone have the same taste in hats." Sometimes they start when one makes a disparaging remark about the other's past shopping partners, as in, "I suppose the beautiful Darlene *loved* gold lamé upholstery." Whatever the cause, their combat is so frequent that friends periodically have to remind them that shopping mall is *not* spelled m-a-u-l.

Sally and Josh get into trouble when they shop because neither can navigate around any store that's larger than their kitchen, and because, even when they manage to get to the right department, they have a hard time buying anything. Either they can't buy sheets because they don't know what size bed they own, or they can't pick out a couch because they don't remember the color of their living room rug. Their shopping outings are exercises in frustration, and they wind up accusing each other of incompetence, which is rather like Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth accusing each other of murder. Their problems weren't solved until they got themselves locked inside a K-Mart one night, and had to sleep on a pile of double-knit pants suits. After that, Sally's mother offered to buy all their furniture, and Josh's mother offered to buy all their clothes.

I've had less help solving my own difficulties, but I finally worked it out so that the only reason my partner and I ever need be in the same store at the same time is to use the bathrooms. I recommend this plan to any couple who find the thought of going to a store together as cheering as the thought of going to the guillotine together. When it comes to buying something for your home, one of you can pick it out and the other can then go to the shop separately and either approve the selection or marvel at the other's lack of taste. In buying gifts for others, you can simply alternate responsibilities. You buy your friends a quilt for their new baby, and let your partner buy them a weed eater for their new home.

Should you ever tire of this solution, and yearn for a romantic shopping expedition à deux, remember the old adage: If you go shopping with your partner, the only thing you're sure to buy yourself is trouble.

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