

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

WHAT HOLDS UNLIKELY LOVERS TOGETHER?

It seems as if everyone knows at least one couple like Gary and Jane: Next to Gary, Robert Redford could pass for Scarface. In college, Gary was voted The Boy Most Likely to Coast Through Life on His Looks. On buses, old women give him *their* seats. Aside from being gorgeous, he is bright, charming, and supposedly something of a financial whiz kid as a commodities trader specializing in pork belly futures.

To look at his wife, Jane, one might easily assume that she was the inspiration for her husband's business specialty. To put it kindly, Jane is no beauty. (To put it unkindly, if she were the only contestant in a beauty contest, she'd *still* come in second.) Moreover, her wardrobe looks as if it were designed by a company specializing in surgical gowns and is surpassed in dullness only by her conversation. (One of Gary's friends once said he'd find it hard to make a choice between having to talk to Jane for an hour or having his appendix removed.)

The obvious question is: What does he see in her? Well, I'm here to tell you. As one member of a couple that could itself be termed something of a mismatch (he's a go-getter; I'm more of...an order-inner), I've made it a habit to study odd couples in an effort to uncover the secret of their alliances.

Where Gary and Jane are concerned, I found the secret to be Gary's mother. Mrs. Fisher and Jane could pass for sisters, if it were possible for sisters to be born forty years apart. It's clear they share a taste for the General Hospital School of haute couture, and from the looks of their hairdos, they must both have a great respect for Martha Washington. They are often in the kitchen together whipping up one or another example of what they consider health food. These include the somewhat infamous prune blintz (an excellent way to get your guests to leave any gathering early) and the ever popular liver and bran loaf.

My guess is that Gary feels as comfortable and as pampered with Jane as he did with his mom, an assumption supported by the fact that every Mother's Day he sends both of them the same card. He seems to expect from women roughly the same amount and quality of attention that nursery school pupils expect from their teachers. Jane is the only woman I know under sixty who is likely to give it to him.

Alice and Howard are quite a different story. Alice is one of the most amusing women I've ever met. Witticisms drop from her lips like lemmings off a cliff. Howard gives the name Howard a bad name. He is an economist by profession, and supposedly quite brilliant. But this rumour has never been confirmed, for the simple reason that nobody, to all recollection, has ever heard Howard speak. Mumble, yes; speak, no. It is whispered that even at their wedding, Howard did not say "I do," (a few souls from the front pews claim that he did, indeed, say something, although it may not have been "I do," but "Help!"). What, everybody wants to know, does Alice see in him?

These people don't understand that while Alice loves to talk, she is not very keen on listening. And since Howard never says anything she has to listen to, he is, for her, the ideal companion. People also don't take into account Alice's first husband, a witty, urbane raconteur who, when he wasn't regaling her friends with charming repartee, was making love to them. Alice concluded that the more witty a man was, the more likely he was to be unfaithful. If her theory is true, Howard should make the most faithful creature outside of a kennel.

Stan is a blithe spirit. Like some character out of a Fred Astaire movie, he taps his way through life. He loves a good time, good food and a good laugh. Marcia, with whom he has been living for three years, is so gloomy that when she enters a room people immediately turn on more lights. She's always carrying around books with titles like "The Meaning of Death," and her typical conversational opener is "How much longer do you think the human race can go on?" What does Stan see in her?

Well, the fact is that Stan feels terribly guilty about being such a lightweight and believes that his association with Marcia is transforming him into a more concerned citizen—although his most serious concern to date, as far as I can tell, is how many people to have at his next birthday party.

In short, everybody has his own intimate reasons for maintaining an alliance that puzzles the outside world. People may shake their heads in wonder that cool, sophisticated Marge seems happily married to Glen, who resembles nothing so much as an unsuccessfully trained gorilla. (He bows to her request for civilized behavior at her elegant cocktail parties by dropping the pop top from his beer into the trash, instead of back into the can before he drinks it.) But Glen is the only person in the world who can make Marge laugh, and frankly, it's a wonderful sound. Whenever I hear it, I'm reminded of my mother's finest old adage regarding relationships: "One person's schlemiel is another person's treasure."

by Bette-Jane Raphael