

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

“THAT’S WHAT YOU’RE WEARING?”
Where do men get their strange ideas about women’s clothes?

The miniskirt hit our house like a Mack truck. Getting an eyeful of last fall’s hemlines in the newspaper, my partner nearly ate the fashion pages. “Why don’t you get a dress with a very short skirt?” he asked in the same aggrieved tone he uses when he asks why I never make rice pudding. “For the same reasons you don’t get a suit with very short pants,” I answered. “It’s impractical, chilly and my legs aren’t good enough.”

When I later decided that inflicting my legs on the public did not constitute a felonious assault, I bought a skirt that ended two inches above my knees. My partner’s only comment was, “You call *that* a mini?” I told him this was as high as I was prepared to go without up-front money from the company that makes the underwear I buy, and for whom I would be doing inadvertent advertising were I to wear anything shorter.

This is only the latest round in my ongoing battle about fashion with a man who has never fully approved of any styles except the topless bathing suit and hot pants. The problem started on our first date, when he pointed to a silver dress that looked as if it had been soldered onto the woman wearing it and said, “That would look good on you.” “On you, too,” I snapped, hoping to nip in the bud what seemed like an ominous penchant for confusing me with Ann-Margret.

Fashion-related difficulties seem to crop up in the homes of many of my friends, who often complain of their partners’ screwball ideas about style. Some of these men are forever intruding as would-be fashion coordinators of their mates’ wardrobes, even when their *own* wardrobes look as if they were thrown together by color-blind monkeys. Sue complains that her husband, who’s been wearing the same ties for six years, is always trying to get her to put on clothes that would look out of place on anyone who isn’t Madonna doing a music video. To this end, he has brought home halter tops so tiny that Sue asks if they are sample swatches of material to re-cover their living room sofa. “Last year he got me an angora sweater the likes of which I assumed hadn’t been manufactured since Marilyn Monroe died. I wore it once and felt so much like a Kewpie doll that I was afraid someone might try to win me in a ring toss.” Recently, her husband has been voicing the hope that

Sue will buy clothes in one of the new elastic fabrics. “He’d really like it if I bought a whole wardrobe that was tight and stretchy,” says Sue, “but I told him I didn’t think he’d be happy living with a large rubber band.”

A lawyer friend of mine has the opposite problem. Instead of urging her to look glamorous, her partner prefers she choose clothes like those found in Iranian fashion magazines. He inspects her wardrobe as if he were a member of the vice squad and she were suspected of endangering public morals. He hovers as she gets dressed for a party, mumbling that her skirt is too short or her dress is cut too low, and suggesting that she add a shawl. “He’d prefer that I dress like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*,” she says, “but I told him it would be inappropriate to go into court wearing a dirndl.”

Some men seem to think that they have to exercise constant supervision over their partners when it comes to dressing properly. “Whenever we go anywhere, Peter thinks he has to tell me what to wear,” says Annie. “I don’t know how he got the idea that I’m a fashion illiterate, but he seems to worry that I might turn up for dinner at his mother’s dressed like a Rockette. ‘Wear something

simple,’ he says as we are getting ready to go to a charity dinner with his boss, as if he were afraid I was about to put on a mummer’s costume. ‘How about a sheet?’ I ask.”

Even if a man doesn’t confuse himself with Calvin Klein, difficulties can still crop up. My clothes-conscious friend Janice, for instance, fumes that her husband takes no notice of her wardrobe, not even to criticize it. His oblivion drives her crazy. When she’s ready to knock him dead in a new dress with bare shoulders and satin flounces, his only comment is, “Are you going to be warm enough in that?” If she presses him to comment on how she looks, he says she looks cute, sort of like the ottoman in their bedroom. The closest he’s ever come to appreciating a stylish piece of clothing is to ask, “Is *that* the latest fashion?” in a tone of such blatant disbelief that Janice says she feels like stabbing him with pinking shears.

While I don’t think we should go too far out of our way to accommodate our partners’ weird ideas about fashion, I do endorse Sue’s solution. After recently telling her husband that if she had wanted a fashion coordinator for a mate she would have married Oscar de la Renta, she made a deal with him: She would wear what she wanted to wear in public, but in private she would sometimes wear what he preferred. “That,” she says, “is the reason why I am the only woman in the world with a spandex bathrobe.”

by Bette-Jane Raphael

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