

CAN THIS BE

LOVE?

by Bette-Jane Raphael

*I look out a window
and see a view; he sees
smudges on the glass*

He walks into the apartment and over to the couch where I am reading in order to give me a kiss. As he bends down, his eyes suddenly veer off past my shoulder; his lips slide over to somewhere just below my left ear. "Why is that chair so dirty?" he asks in dismay so palpable I am reminded of my mother's distress as she asked, "Why aren't you eating?"

I look around, as fearful and guilty as if I'd decapitated an enemy in our living room and forgotten to clean up. I follow his eyes to the offending piece of furniture. Dirty? Where? I look and look again, but see no dirt. "Can't you see it?" he asks, as if he cannot believe he is speaking to a sighted person. I look again. Is the chair so hideously filthy that I am deliberately blocking it from my mind? Did I eat my lunch in that chair and absently wipe my hands and face on it?

Wait a minute, is that a white smudge on the arm? Yes, it is—some powdered sugar from last night's dessert. I jump up, relieved to find my faculties intact, and quickly brush off the offending particles, careful to catch the white specks in my hand before they can reach the floor. Behind me, he is still shaking his head in disbelief that I was unaware of what was to him so blatant.

When it comes to dirt perception, my lover and I are broom handles apart. I look out a window and see a view; he looks out a window and sees smudges on the glass. He has the eye of an eagle where grease, crumbs and dust are concerned; I, he says, am walking around in a dream. I blithely handle books that leave my hands black as coal, step trippingly across floors to which my feet stick, drink happily from glasses that show signs of what they previously contained, as well as who drank the contents.

In self-defense, I have concocted several theories to explain this difference in our ability to perceive dirt. When he walks into the kitchen at night and notices finger marks on the refrigerator to which I have been completely blind, I explain it by the difference in our heights. Since he is much taller, I tell him, we necessarily have a different perspective on the light that bounces off grease. Ergo, what might be plainly visible to him at nearly six feet is simply not reflected at my eye level, almost eight inches lower. See?

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No, he doesn't see. Even if there were some wacky logic to my theory, he wonders why there's *never* any gleam of dirt at the five-foot-four level.

I then theorize that the fact that he wears glasses and I don't makes our abilities to seek out and eradicate dirt so at variance from one another. He answers that anyone who can read the ingredients on a candy bar wrapper in the middle of a movie, the way I can, is perfectly capable of seeing a dust ball the size of a small dirigible under the dining room table.

Sometimes I can't see the dirt even after he's pointed it out, which places me in a kind of Emperor's New Clothes situation, busily wiping up dirt that is to me invisible. Unfortunately, never having seen it in the first place, I don't really know when I've completely removed it and am forced to ask, "Is it gone yet?" thereby giving myself away.

I have honestly tried to become more vigilant, but this blindness I have to all forms of everyday household dirt is deeply ingrained, probably something I acquired during those years when I practiced a look of amazement at my mother's statement that my room was a disgusting mess. Thus, try as I might I haven't been able to develop the kind of sensitivity to grease that I have toward, say, fresh pastry, which I can see through walls.

My friend Susan has worked out a wonderful solution to the problem she has with her husband, who is so offended by anything resembling dust that he writes her angry notes in it with his fingers, pithy little missives like, "Clean this table, slob!" Now she just keeps the apartment dark, the blinds closed, the lights low. Every once in a while her husband looks around kind of bewildered and asks, "Isn't it dark in here?" "No," she says, and that's that.

Susan thinks men are more fastidious about household grime than women because their mothers were always mopping up after them. (She claims she has never seen her mother-in-law without a sponge in her hand.) But then I remember my mother's friend Bernice, who kept plastic covers over everything in her house except her husband, and him she hounded from morning till night about tracking dirt into the house. She did that until the day he stepped outside to wipe his feet and never came back.

I tried Susan's solution—kept the blinds drawn and the lights low—and it worked for two days. Then, on the evening of the third day, my lover banged his knee against a chair and realized, in his pain, that he couldn't see any of the furniture in the apartment, that, in fact, he was groping around like a coal miner. "Either open the blinds," he said, "or get me a hat with a light on the front of it."

So for me, it was back to the drawing board, which he first had me wipe off.