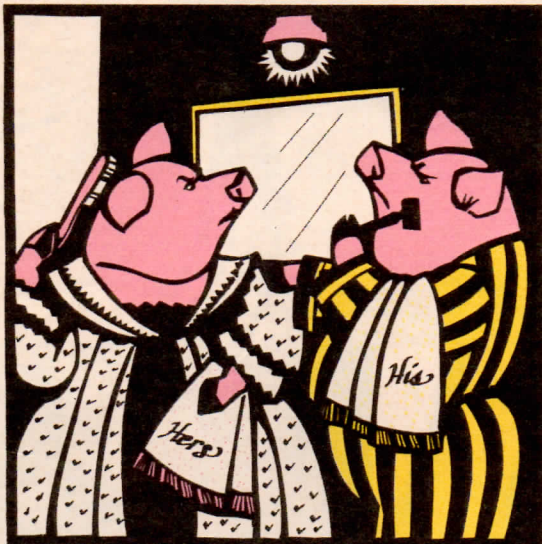


**T**he first time I cut an onion in my boyfriend's kitchen, he looked at me as if I were slicing up his dog, and said, "You're not using the cutting board!"

He said it the way he might have exclaimed, "You're a Russian agent!" or "You're bald!" From that moment I knew that I had better watch my step in that or any kitchen where the two of us cooked together. I was right. Altercations involving the proper use of cooking utensils are standard operating procedure in our household to this day.

I had always thought that the bedroom, and more specifically the bed in the bedroom, was the most dangerous place for a couple, the place that held the most peril for any relationship. I mean, I'd read the books: I knew what a disaster sexual incompatibility was and how dangerous it was to go to sleep angry. I just hadn't connected the fact that the anger one goes to bed with usually gets started somewhere else, in some seemingly innocuous place like the closet, the car or the bathroom. For

## BATHROOMS, KITCHENS, CLOSETS,



most couples, there are places where differences of style come to the fore and put them at loggerheads, or where spacial and human relationships seem to have a direct bearing on one another.

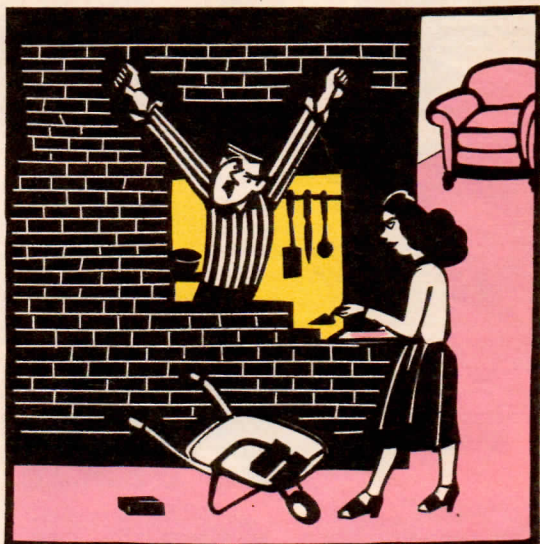
My lover and I can wake up feeling as if the words June, spoon and moon were written just for us. Then he opens the refrigerator to find there is no half-and-half for his cereal, and the cream cheese has furry, green spots on it. "Didn't you shop...?" "I work too, you know..." "Oh, this is just great..." "I'm not your mother..."

Suddenly, The Honeymooners have turned into George and Martha. I have even considered walling up the kitchen entirely, perhaps with my lover inside it, as in *The Cask of Amontillado*.

Some mornings we don't even make it to the kitchen. We break the whole thing up in the bathroom. When it comes to bathroom space, one rule applies: There's never enough. So two civilized people can find themselves maneuvering for room at the sink with all the elegance of subway riders at rush hour. He always seems to be opening the medicine cabinet just as I am attempting some subtle shadings with my blusher, jostling my arm so that I come away looking as though I'd made up in complete darkness. He sees no reason I can't use another mirror, pointing out that there are four in

our bedroom, two in the hall, and one in the living room. What does he care that the bathroom mirror is the only one with the right overhead light for my delicate face painting? "I don't see why you need that junk, anyway" is the closest he's ever come to a solution to the problem. We leave the room calling each other such unloving epithets as "selfish hog!"

If we manage to get through our morning ablutions intact, we still have to face the closets. If I could add one law to the statute books, it would concern building codes, stipulating that every bedroom must be built with two closets. Closets have a habit of mirroring our inner order, or disorder. His side looks like a rack in the suit department of an exclusive haberdasher's. All the jackets face the same way, as if they were waiting in line at the movies. My side looks like a jumble sale at Bedlam. I like it that way and I know where everything is. The sight of such disorder is a red flag to my more orderly mate, and it often starts us off on a dangerous course of conversation: "I



thought you were going to clean up that mess..."

I'm happy (if not particularly generous) to say that my lover and I are not alone in these difficulties. One friend believes, for instance, that the fact she and her husband moved to an apartment with two bathrooms has saved her marriage. "In the beginning," she says, "when we had only one bathroom, I had to be very careful about the way I hung the towels. The corners had to line up, and they could only be folded once over the bar, for maximum aeration. Aeration was a very big word in our house, and if I didn't fold the towels right, I'd get a lecture on it, which would make me want to move to a public bath house. Now, with two bathrooms, when I throw a towel any which way across the bar in my bathroom, I feel deliciously sinful."

Another friend complains that every time she tries to make up at the bathroom mirror, she has to race against the steam from her boyfriend's shower, which clouds her image as she hurriedly tries to apply one cosmetic after another. "You can always tell who won the race," she says, "by whether or not I have mascara on both eyes. If I seem to be looking at you more intently with my left eye, I lost."

A third friend tells about an ex-lover who,

Whenever he found the bathmat wet, would calmly put down a clean towel to stand on as he dried himself after a shower. "That one act came to symbolize his whole attitude toward the relationship," she remembers grimly. "I'd see him standing on a clean towel, a towel I'd lugged to and from the laundry in the basement, and I'd explode. 'That's just typical of you,' I'd yell. 'You don't put any effort into this relationship. You just take what you want out of it. If you think we have an endless supply of towels, you do the laundry!' And he'd stand there blinking at me as if I'd gone insane."

The kitchen, too, is fraught with danger. "Glasses left in the sink," says a woman in my building with an ominous glare. "When I find he's left glasses in the sink, I get furious. 'What do you think happens to those glasses?' I ask him sweetly. 'Do you think they rinse themselves and then jump into the dishwasher?' To me those glasses represent how he takes me for granted. The sight of them is enough to make me scream."



## CARS, THE INNOCENT PLACES



Even the trip to the supermarket for the stuff to put in the kitchen can be perilous. Shopping is a very personal thing; everybody has a different style of operating. My lover does not like to be in a store one minute more than is absolutely necessary. Shopping list in hand, he whirls through Food Town like The White Tornado. I, on the other hand, am The Conscientious Consumer. Does this brand of tomatoes give you more for your money than that one? Is the unit price of this size of detergent less than the unit price of that size? By the time we hit the registers we are chafing under each other's exasperating differences.

Lethal places abound outside the reaches of domesticity, too. Take, for instance, the opportunities for argument in Other People's Houses. Old grievances that you don't quite have the courage to bring up in private seem to be more easily aired in conversation with other couples. I realized this recently, after a couple who visited us for dinner got into their car and drove away, and my lover mused, "Why is it that couples wait until they're in company to pick a fight?" He did not ask the question idly. The couple who had just left us were obviously (Continued on page 329)

# WHERE LOVING COUPLES MAKE WAR

by Bette-Jane Raphael