

How to Be a Couple

The transition is not as easy as it looks *By PAUL REISER*

From "Couplehood"

I THINK THE REASON men and women get together is we can each do different things, and if we get together, everything gets done. Whatever comes up, somebody's good at it.

Ever catch a sweater on a hook and a thread sticks out? Men will stare at the rip for half an hour and whine. "Oh, look at that! Do you believe that? Brand-new sweater too! Now I gotta throw it out. There's no way this can be saved."

Women know you can turn the sweater inside out, pull the thread through, knot, and in 12 seconds you've got a new sweater.

On the other hand, women rarely get involved with connecting stereos, which is one thing men can do.

And it works out. I'll be putting up speakers and suddenly yell, "Oh, no, look what I just did to this sweater—caught it on the speaker!"

And instantly we *both* have something to do.

Teamwork. Splitting up responsibilities makes going to a movie



Sitting Pretty—After the wedding you discover why you really got married.

easier. "Honey, I'll park the car—you buy the tickets." Everybody has a job.

You must each accept that there are sacrifices to be made. It's a military operation, and the two of you are a precision team. Of course, this expertise doesn't happen overnight;

60A

ILLUSTRATIONS: © BARRY BLITT

it takes months and months of Saturday-night practice.

"Okay. You get on the ticket buyers' line. I'll park the car and get on the ticket holders' line. At 1900 hours the doors will open. I'll have to move out—if I don't have tickets, we're dead. So get me those tickets. Now cover me—I'm going in!"

There's no romance involved. It's all business. Couples just starting out don't know this. Ever see first-date couples at a weekend movie? No. Because they never get in.

They are far too busy holding hands and being polite. "Which movie would you rather see? If you'd rather do something else ... Oh, look—everything seems to be sold out."

Of course it's sold out! It's Saturday night. Separate! Split up! Do your jobs first—be nice to each other afterward.

Baby, It's Cold Outside. Actually, getting out of the house is harder than doing what you plan to do once you get out. There are a thousand false starts.

First, the "Who has the keys?"—"You had them"—"No, I gave them to you" drama.

Then the "Did you leave the machine on?" play.

And the ever-popular "Is it going to be cold later?"—"What am I, the weatherman? Just take a jacket and let's go" cartoon.

That's the one I particularly enjoy.

My bride, an intelligent woman, refuses to accept that weather at the end of the day is often going to be different from the way it is now. She becomes a child. "I'm not taking a jacket. I'll be fine."

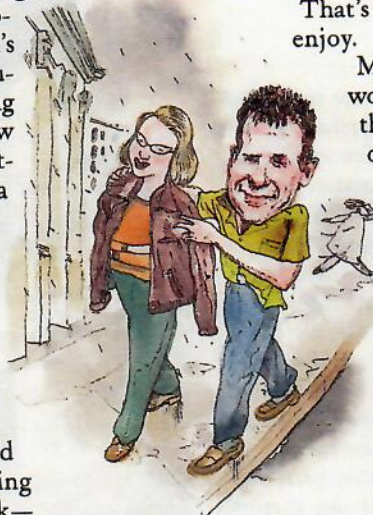
Which relegates me to the "just take it and throw it in the car what's the big deal" role.

For her, it's a wardrobe issue. The jacket doesn't go with anything, and it makes her

look bulky. She'd rather freeze.

I, on the other hand, have my own interests in mind. Because I know that later, when she's cold, I'm going to have to do the Gentleman Thing—take off my jacket and drape it over my wife's shoulders.

Understand, if we were caught in a hailstorm, or the country were



Coat Tale— Your job is the keeper of her jacket.

invaded and we had to flee with only what we had on, I would have no problem. I would give her my jacket instinctively. Sure, I'd freeze, but I'd be a hero.

But here we have a choice. It's not hailing. We're not fleeing. We're standing in front of a closet with protective gear for every potential five-degree variance—but no, "I'll be fine," she says.

So we go. And of course, later it's freezing, and she's huddling in my jacket and I, who knew to bring a jacket, am wearing *no* jacket.

And the kicker is, it's not like my jacket looks so good on her anyway. It certainly looks worse than any jacket of her *own*. But somehow it's okay, because when people see my wildly mismatched jacket draped over her shoulders, they won't say, "Boy, what was she thinking?" They'll say, "Wow, isn't he sweet? Look how he sacrificed his jacket for her."

And what I'll be thinking is this: I'm a *jerk*. I thought this through, I planned ahead—and I'm still freezing.

Forever After. It's night. I look over at my bride, dreaming, blissfully cradled in 90 percent of the blanket.

I tug at it gingerly. She stirs, seemingly unaware, and rolls farther away, taking with her another good foot and a half of the blanket. I decide it's not worth waking her up. Despite my affection, I resent her deeply.

I sit up. I look at her. I watch her sleep. I think to myself, *How*

can this be? After all the negotiating and maneuvering, how is it that this person—who, by my own initiative, will be placing her head 12 inches away from my head for the rest of my life—is getting such a better end of the bargain?

I pull up the pathetically small segment of blanket left to me and scoot up next to the woman of

my dreams—partly because I hope that her sleep will rub off on me, and partly because I figure she's got to be warmer than I am.

As I hold her close, I remember: *This* is why we go through all of that. Because holding The One Who Fits in Your Arms feels this good.

At this point my wife senses that I'm staring at her and opens one eye. "What?" she says.

I say, "What do mean 'what'?"

"What are you looking at me for?"

"I wasn't looking ... I was just



Bedside Manners— There are none when it comes to nighttime blanket battles.

thinking ... are you really going to be right there every night?"

"Yes."

"You're saying that of all the people in the world, the one whom you will be with night after night is me?"

"Uh-huh."

If I had let it go there, it would have been a nice moment.

"And the reason would be—what? I'm that appealing?"

Opening both eyes, she is now fully awake and props herself up on her elbow. Before she can say anything, I say, "I went too far. I realize that now. You just go back to sleep."

She slides toward me, and we find homes for our arms and legs. Before long, we're sleeping.

And in the morning the dance continues.

QUIZ KIDS

My friend Phil drives while his daughters, ages three and four, call to him from the back seat: "Did you ever put a red light on your pizza? Did you ever put a building on your pizza? Well, did you ever put a truck on your pizza?"

After a few hours, when the kids tire of the pizza-topping questions, they switch to pointing out people and asking, "Where is that lady going? Why does that man have a blue car?"

Phil is one of those parents who thought he'd survived the toughest stage of parenthood once his kids stopped asking "Why?" after every statement he made. I remember thinking the same thing about my own children.

I'd say something like, "We're going to the store now."

The kids ask, "Why?"

"To buy food."

"Why?"

"Because we have to eat."

"Why?"

"Because we want to live. Life is intrinsically a good thing, and we want to preserve it."

Once, we made it all the way back to the creation of the universe in only four *whys*.

I hate to tell Phil, but he still has to face the dreaded "what if" phase. That's when your child says, "What if a big spaceship landed on the roof and aliens captured you and took you to Mars? What if the refrigerator had a nose?"

I suspect that as tough as those questions are, they're pablum compared with what's coming next. I remember my 15-year-old cousin asking his mother one day, "How does it feel to know you have only a few decades left to live, and you'll never be able to reach all of your goals?" Give me the pizza-topping questions any day.

—SANDI KAHN SHELTON in *Working Mother*