

The Match GAME

Most couples match.
But when their
looks clash, why does it
bother us so much?

By Aimee Lee Ball

for about a year of my adult life, I was involved with a man so physically beautiful that I was always regarding him the way I imagine Billy Joel must look at Christie Brinkley, thinking: What is this person *doing* with me? There were any number of important reasons that explained why our relationship didn't work out (like the fact that he felt constrained by monogamy), but I always felt that we were somehow...playing in different leagues.

No doubt a shrink would have a field day with this glimpse into my psyche. *Aha!* the good doctor might say. *A clear-cut case of low self-esteem, with a compound fracture of the entitlement bone.* I don't think so. Actually, I feel OK about the way I look. I'd certainly prefer less knobby knees and a freckle-free complexion, and I might be persuaded to try life with deep blue eyes, but most of the time I feel—how should

I say this?—supported by my looks, deeply enhanced by joba-oil conditioner and lash-separating mascara and control-top panty hose. I do not go out into the world feeling that I deserve only dweebs and schlubs (*schlub*: from the Latin, meaning he who still lives with his mother).

Nevertheless...there is something jarring about couples mismatched in physical attributes, whether one is a participant or a disinterested bystander. I don't know whether anything more than screen sex took place between Sean Young and James Woods, but even allowing a margin of error for personal

taste, he was out of her realm. Even allowing a margin for money or power or cachet, Woody Allen belonged with Louise Lasser much more than with Diane Keaton or Mia Farrow. I happen to think Bette Midler has one of the world's great voices, and I'm sure she's a very fine person with humor and charm and grace, but it seems entirely appropriate that her husband does not look like Warren Beatty. I happen to think Barbra Streisand has the world's greatest voice and skin to die for, but there's no way she fit with Don "Pretty Boy" Johnson.

These are, in the way of the world, aberrations. Most of the time, princes



TOP: VICTOR MALAFRONTÉ/CELEBRITY PHOTO. BOTTOM, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: R. CORKERY/LGI; SCOTT DOWNIE/CELEBRITY PHOTO; VICTOR MALAFRONTÉ/CELEBRITY PHOTO; PHIL ROACH/PHOTOREPORTERS; RON GALELLA; PHOTOFEST

and princesses stick with each other, as do frogs and frogettes, according to the book *Mirror, Mirror...*, a study of the importance of looks in everyday life. Age and experience give people a good idea about the rules of attraction, about who's available to them, and both men and women make choices about dating and mating based, at least in part, on the probability of being accepted and the strong desire to avoid rejection. In the unlikely event that the princess and the frog do get together, they're not likely to live happily ever after. "In mismatched relationships, participants generally become increasingly dissatisfied," say authors Elaine Hatfield and Susan Sprecher (respectively, a psychologist and a sociologist). "The princess starts to remember the attention she used to get from the prince (or two or three) she could have married. How could she ever have married a frog? The frog begins to wonder, too." It is instructive to think of the roly-

poly Stuart Markowitz character on *L.A. Law* doubting the true love of the classically pretty Ann Kelsey. (Never mind that the real-life actors playing these two have had a long-term marriage, seem-

Most of the time, princesses and princesses stick with each other.

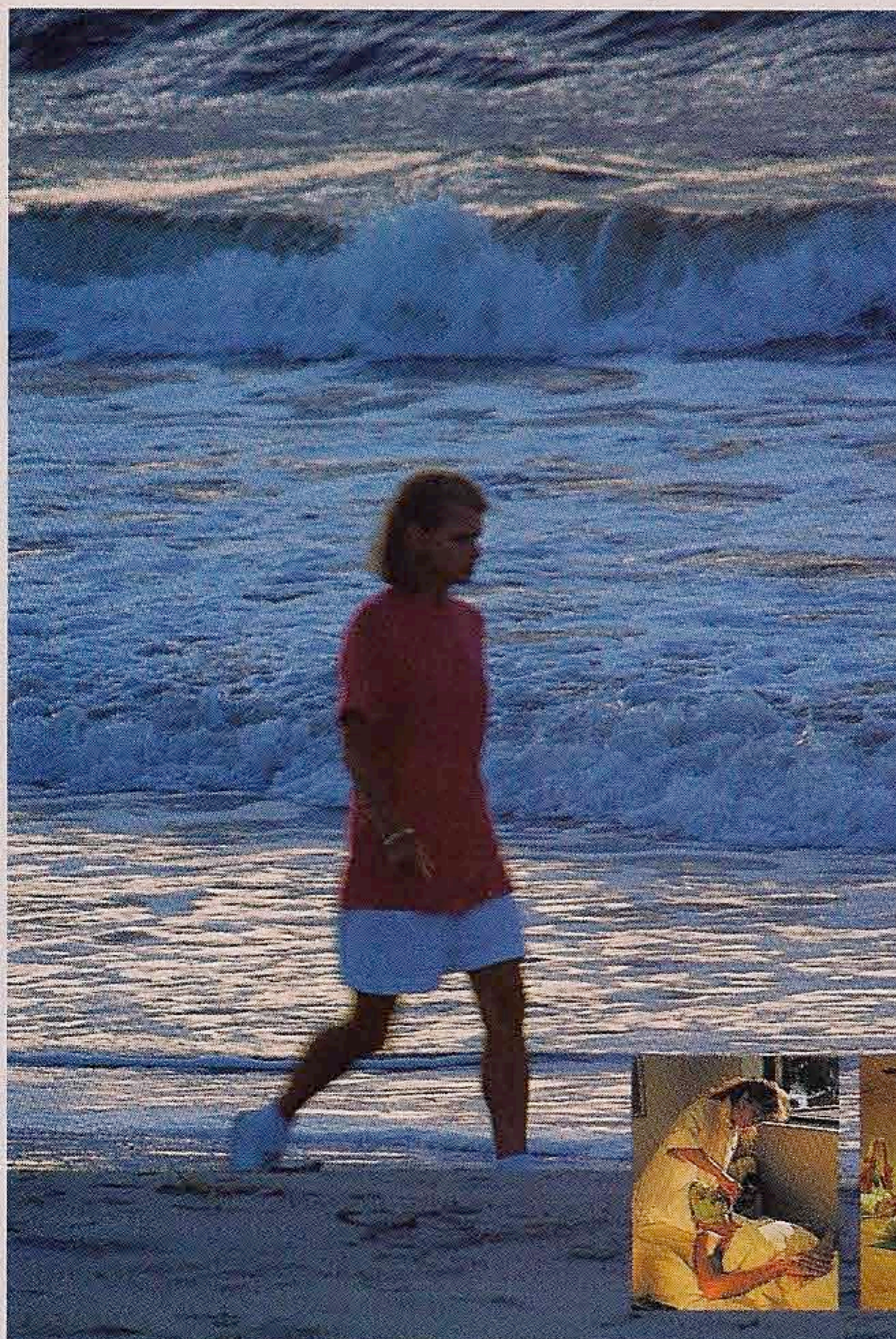
ingly having overcome these thorny, froggy issues.)

What each of us deems appropriate and attainable in a mate has been reduced to an unemotional and quantifiable Romantic Market Value, or what he calls RMV, by Larry E. Davis, a professor of social work and psychology at Washington University in St. Louis. Romantic Market Value factors have to do with demographic variables—education, income, profession—plus

looks. "We have a notion of equality, of reciprocity," explains Davis. "Our total romantic worth is supposed to match up with our mate's. And physical attractiveness is the biggest part. That's why we feel a sense of violation when people don't match. We have a fundamental sense of equity, and we're only judgmental when we perceive an injustice. If you see a beautiful woman with a guy who's a gorilla, it violates something in you. Then you begin to think there must be some trade-off. Take the classic example of the century: Jacqueline Kennedy and Aristotle Onassis. That's a real exchange: somebody who has tremendous status as a woman, considered one of the most beautiful women in the world, and a dumpy little fellow who has a lot of money. When you match them up and ask, Does she belong with a guy who looks like this? the answer is no. But if you look behind the scenes, it's not a bad deal."

Studies have shown that we also seek out same-sex friends of equivalent looks—this business of opposites attracting doesn't even hold true in friendship. We seem to look for a level of comfort and familiarity. "You can get a group together and ask, 'How many of you are married to people of the same religion?' and the hands go up," reports Davis. "'The same race?' and the hands go up. 'How many are married to people you think are about equally attractive to you?' and the hands go up. You think all these are just random probabilities? No, it's a very deliberate process."

There may be a tall, blond, clean-shaven version of your physical counterpart and a short, dark, hairy version, but the microcosm of choice is specific, says Davis. "Once you decide someone has significant or sufficient Romantic Market Value, you say, 'OK, I'll allow you into my romantic sphere, and we'll see if we can fall in love,' but rarely do we let people in without having sufficient RMV. We deliberately decide who to fall in love with." You can *enhance* your RMV, should you care to invest in night school and plastic surgery. RMV is not fixed, as Roseanne and Tom Arnold both seem to be (*continued on page 110*)



Especially for women.

Let us define a modern-day spa experience, Cloister-style. An experience as multifaceted as life itself. Delving health and beauty. Fitness. Nutrition. And fashion.

Call it an event. Five enlightening, even uplifting, days. Call it *Especially for Women*.

The Cloister and Sea Island Beach Club Spa play your gracious hosts Jan. 16-21. Reserve now.

The Cloister®, Sea Island, GA 31561. 800-SEA-ISLAND.

Sea Island
THE CLOISTER®



Two, three and five-day packages also available.

(continued from page 104) demonstrating through weight loss, although his rather speedier transformation from ugly duckling to swan makes them now seem oddly mismatched (until they open their mouths). But you inherently know your rating, and you especially know what the beauty part is.

"Beauty is clearly learned behavior," says Davis. "We're not born understanding what beauty is. It's a cultural definition. Historically, notions of beauty have changed somewhat—heavier women, thinner women—but fundamentally there's not a hell of a lot of change. Madonna looks like Marilyn Monroe, so what are we talking about? And you didn't just start this process. You knew when you were 7 years old that Susie was prettier than you, or at 15 that you had a better body. We find this assumption offensive because it sounds mechanistic, and we want to be above it. But my guess is that at five o'clock this afternoon, you and I will both be in places where people have about the same incomes and look very much like we do. Do I like that reality? I only report the reality, I don't construct it."

We (at least the societal "we") are so bowled over by a pretty face that we actually assign certain values to attractive people that may have nothing to do with reality. "Attractive people are thought to make better marriage partners, better sex partners, to have more potential to earn a higher salary," says Rodney Cate, a professor of human development at Iowa State University who has studied courtship practices. "We see them as being more interpersonally and socially competent. And there's a halo effect, meaning that if you're seen with an attractive partner, some of those characteristics may generalize over to you when you're observed by a third party."

That may explain why a dweeb would want to be seen with a real looker, but it doesn't reveal the opposite: why Robin Givens would marry Mike Tyson, why Michelle Pfeiffer would choose Fisher Stevens, and what the *hell* John Lennon was doing with Yoko Ono. Clin-

ical social psychologist Bernard I. Murstein of Connecticut College explains these matches in terms of attraction as a private balance sheet: We use our looks as a kind of currency for trading in life, and with mismatched couples the trade seems not to be equal—these people didn't spend what we think they should have. "But the unattractive person may have hidden assets," says Murstein, "like money or a charismatic personality. Or the attractive person may have a deficit, such as low self-esteem."

"When there is a disparate physical attractiveness, you usually find some kind of explanation. And the reason we're troubled is that we look at these situations and there's some unwritten history we haven't become acquainted with that explains it." Murstein did a study that found that attractive men who are paired with less attractive women usually have low self-esteem, but he didn't find the reverse. "In our society, men who have greater power and status may feel that no matter how they look, they're entitled to an attractive woman. They trade their status and economic substance. We're much more used to seeing ugly guys with attractive women than vice versa."

Fortunately, something else happens with human nature. In another study, Murstein found that people almost never identify their partners as less than average in looks. Giving people a five-point scale, ranging from ugly to beautiful, from which to describe their partner, Murstein found that they chose only the top three points—there were no dogs. Does this mean that love conquers all? "It means that if you get to know somebody, you can't see him objectively anymore," says Murstein. "What was once a mouth full of crooked teeth becomes the charming way he smiles when he's

thinking of a certain something. After people know each other, looks don't matter much."

So perhaps my Adonis wasn't so gorgeous after all, viewed realistically rather than through the eyes of love? Nah—when strange women swat you out of

the way at parties, you can assume you're with a very attractive man. I'm left with the possibility that either he had some self-image problem of his own or that I am just fabulously charismatic. Guess which one I choose?

We like a Noah's Ark effect in couples: There's a certain harmony we see in people of comparable attractiveness, a certain aesthetic sense of rightness, according to Murstein. That's why a giraffe like Susan Anton seemed wrong with a

shrimp like Dudley Moore, why we're cheered to see cute Jane Pauley paired off with cute Garry Trudeau, why we assume that the dazzling Diane Sawyer must have found a mother lode of wit and charm in Mike Nichols. I'm still not sure if this theory adequately explains Mrs. Alan Alda. But it does clarify how a woman I know fell in love with a man who looked like Pee-wee Herman. "Isn't he the sexiest thing you ever saw?" she once asked a few of us at dinner (Pee-wee was not present), and each of us, empowered by a little too much Valpolicella, admitted, "Not to me," which pretty much put a kibosh on the friendship. (This love object also collected guns and Nazi memorabilia, so I was not prone to think well of him, even if he had looked like Pierce Brosnan.) It took me a long time to recognize that this man and woman might be viewed as physical counterparts, about equally attractive in the eyes of the world and empowered by things other than looks. It explained a lot. I have since learned to smile politely and lie through my teeth. ●

Attraction is like a balance sheet: We use our looks as currency for trading in life.