



# Everything but Sex: The Office- Wife Thing

Keith\* is looking out the window, cradling the telephone in the crook of his neck. "You're the best," he breathes into the mouthpiece in that purr I love. "I'd be lost without you. Okay, see you later." He hangs up the phone and turns... to me.

See, those sweet, soothing words were for Sue, the Other Woman in my husband's life. The one with whom he spends sixty hours a week. Keith works in television news, always on beeper, rarely home for *Letterman*. When he does walk through the door, our cat hisses at him. His profession often takes him out of town. And wherever he works, whether here in New York or a thousand miles away, Sue goes too. Because the Other Woman is his assistant.

I know what you're thinking: *Office romance... number one marriage buster*. I used to worry. But the

That woman at  
his workplace  
who spends more  
time with him  
than you do—how  
lethal is she?

By Carla Merolla

longer their relationship has lasted, the less crazy I get when she calls on Sunday afternoons to discuss sound bites and ratings, the less paranoid I am when he tells me to eat without him because he and Sue are grabbing a sandwich. Oh, sometimes I'll be watching the eleven o'clock news in a half-empty bed, and suspicion will hit me in the face like a wet rag. Then I remember Sue is his workmate, his pal. He's with the woman I am now comfortable describing as Keith's "office spouse."

## Bonding, Not Bedding

Office marriage, like real marriage, is about sharing and friendship, about working toward a common goal and having fun while you're doing it. It's the connection with the one person in the office who knows you have a voodoo doll in your bottom drawer that bears a scary resemblance to your boss. It's love... without sex, says Sharon Lobel, professor of management at Seattle University. And it's a phenomenon of the modern age, because in the twentieth century B.C. (Before Calvin Klein), most women held traditional women's jobs: secretary, nurse, teacher. And their work friends were other women from the secretarial pool, nurses' station, and teachers' lounge.

Today, women and men are often professional peers, and the climate's just right for bonding—as coworkers and friends. "On the job, we're good for each other," says Lobel. My friend Deirdre, a computer-systems analyst, agrees. "Overall, my job is really boring," she says, "but working with Trevor makes it fun. I've had really close work friendships with women, and I hate to say it, but there's always this unspoken rivalry—whether it's over our levels of responsibility or the extent of our wardrobes. With a man, the situation is different. Like in my marriage—if things are tough, it's us against the world. With Trevor, if work's a bitch, it's us against the CEO. We commiserate with each other. I don't even get the Monday blahs anymore."

When that contentment spills over at home, not only is it much more pleasant to be around a happy person, but there isn't as much flotsam and jetsam to clutter up your personal life. "Having an office spouse to discuss the day-to-day nonsense with, you come home relaxed and ready to be with your mate," says New York City relationship expert Linda Barbanel. "You've given at the office, so to speak." That's not saying your man won't want to share his triumphs and tribulations with you—it's just that the trivial complaints get dumped on the office spouse.

MAPS: SELEN; STYLING: Carl Eberhard; Photos: Steve; Claire; Day; Hair and makeup: Stefano Arzenazzini for Utopia the Agency

## What to Bring Home From the Job

Jonathan tells his wife, Vivian, more than she wants to know about Melissa, his law partner. "She and her boyfriend are renting a house in the mountains next summer," Vivian informs me. "Last month, they went hang gliding. I know their favorite restaurants, which Broadway shows they've seen in the last year, and the types of shirts she buys him."

"If your mate is sharing personal information about his office spouse with you, it might be his way of pointing out a weakness in your own relationship," says Steven Carter, coauthor of *What Smart Women Know*. Maybe Jonathan feels he needs a little more romance, adventure, TLC. But there is a difference between personal information and private details.

"When Sal told me his assistant happened to mention that she'd had an affair, gotten pregnant, and had an abortion without her husband's ever knowing, I was furious," recalls Mara. "Does she want him to know that she's fooled around before and could do it again? With him? And what could he possibly be telling her about me?"

First, her business doesn't have to become your business, says Carter. "If you're uncomfortable with the subject, it's okay to say, 'I'm interested in your work, even your work together, but I really don't want to hear about her private life.' Then drop it." As for sharing the details of your *own* relationship, if a man is going to talk, he's going to talk, Carter concedes. "But you could say, 'It's painful for me to think that you're sharing anything intimate with her.' Then trust that he won't."

## Just Because There's Smoke . . .

Okay, we have to broach this subject: Even though there's no sex in an office marriage (if there were, it would be a different article), odds are there is chemistry. "It's sort of like *Cheers*," says Celia, an advertising-agency illustrator who's been happily married to Jake for seven years and a creative partner of Larry's for three. "When Sam and Diane were still in the flirting stage, the show was great. Then when

they started living together, the episodes became boring. That's why the writers split them up again. I don't think either Larry or I believe we'd be good together in a real relationship. But we spark each other's creativity here in the office, and we have fun."

In a survey coconducted by Sharon Lobel, about 10 percent of the one thousand people polled who described themselves as involved in office marriages admitted to being sexually attracted to their nine-to-five spouses. And it's okay to fantasize about what sex would be like with the person you work so closely with, says Carter. You may even take it a step further and flirt. "Flirting is one of the ways adults have fun," he says.

Work creates an intense bond. Add sexual attraction to the mix and it's easy to see how you can get . . . confused. Most of us are smart enough to realize, though, that what we share during the day is only part of the picture. You don't see him at home scratching and burping, and he doesn't see you bleaching your mustache.

Still, the reason most sexually attracted people give for exercising discipline at the office, according to Lobel's poll, is love for and loyalty to their life partners.

## I Have Met the Enemy, and She Is . . . Not That Bad

I'm positive that Keith, like the participants in Lobel's study, is totally loyal to me. Nevertheless, one late night, I confronted Keith at the front door holding a clock in my hand, which I promptly smashed at his feet as soon as he crossed the threshold. "Do you know what time it is?" I demanded. (In my mind, they had run off to Mexico, where Keith could get a quickie divorce and she could get dysentery.) "I don't," he said, "because the clock is in a million pieces. I'll clean this up in the morning. Now, I need sleep." He kissed me on the forehead and climbed the stairs to our bedroom.

Still seething the next day, I confided in my friend Elinor: "I know she kept him out later than necessary. She probably wanted to stop for a drink. She's *after* him." Elinor's advice: "Just show up at the office one day. She has to *see* you so she knows *you're* the wife."

"Making yourself known is wise," says Carter. "But you're not

doing it just to claim your territory. You've been imagining she is everything you're not. You must confront that."

I did: In my head, Sue was one of the *Baywatch* blondes—but with an IQ nudging two hundred. Then I met her. I'm not saying she isn't attractive. But she's five feet five, not larger than life. And I have to admit, I liked her.

## But Could He? Would He?

"For friendship or a colleague relationship to turn romantic, there has to be fertile ground," says Barbanell. "Marriage can't be a hundred percent every day. But ask yourself, *Has anything about my relationship changed? Is he still there for me, sexually and emotionally?* If you don't detect any changes in his behavior, stop worrying. And if you have trouble exorcising your demons, tell him this is your craziness and has nothing to do with him or her—or with him *and* her. Don't forget that he chose *you*. You have a history."

Yes, Keith and I do: ten years of love. I think I make him very happy at home, and Sue makes him very happy at work. I can live with that. Okay, he can come home late. They can have a drink after work. They can chat on Sundays as much as they want. Friendship is friendship no matter what the time of day, whether you live next door to each other or work at the next desk. And now I must confess that my change of heart is *somewhat* related to my change of *jobs*. A few months ago, I joined a new company, and sitting at the next desk was Chris. He's nice and, okay, *cute*. When my boss gets on my back, I glance over at Chris. He turns to his computer and E-mails me: "How 'bout some CPC in the park at lunch?" CPC stands for cheddar popcorn—he knows that's my favorite crummy-day, pick-me-up snack.

So I'm *proud* to announce my office engagement to Chris. The office-groom-to-be is the husband of Michelle, a city planner, whom I met at a dinner party at their home. (I wonder whether she really *wanted* to invite Keith and me or if one of her friends said, "She has to *see* you so she knows *you* are the wife.")

Anyway, wish us luck. Chris and me, and Keith and Sue. I hope the four of us live happily ever after. ☺

*\*In the interest of privacy, some names have been changed.*