

A little respect
goes a long way
when it comes
to getting along
with your
beloved's family

HIS PARENTS: "YOUR TURKEY IS DRY, you didn't take the family name, and you're five years older than him."

Your parents: "He's not your religion, he's supporting an ex-wife and child, and you make more money than he does."

And if either of your parents nudge you about wanting grandchildren one more time ...

Everyone with in-laws has a story. One woman recounts how her mother-in-law overheard her on the phone saying the word "six" and thought she said "sex." Shocked, her mother-in-law thought she was having an affair and told the rest of the family.

When Winston Churchill and wife Clementine returned from their honeymoon, they discovered that Lady Randolph Churchill had completely redecorated the couple's home-to-be in a fancier style, abhorrent to the new bride.

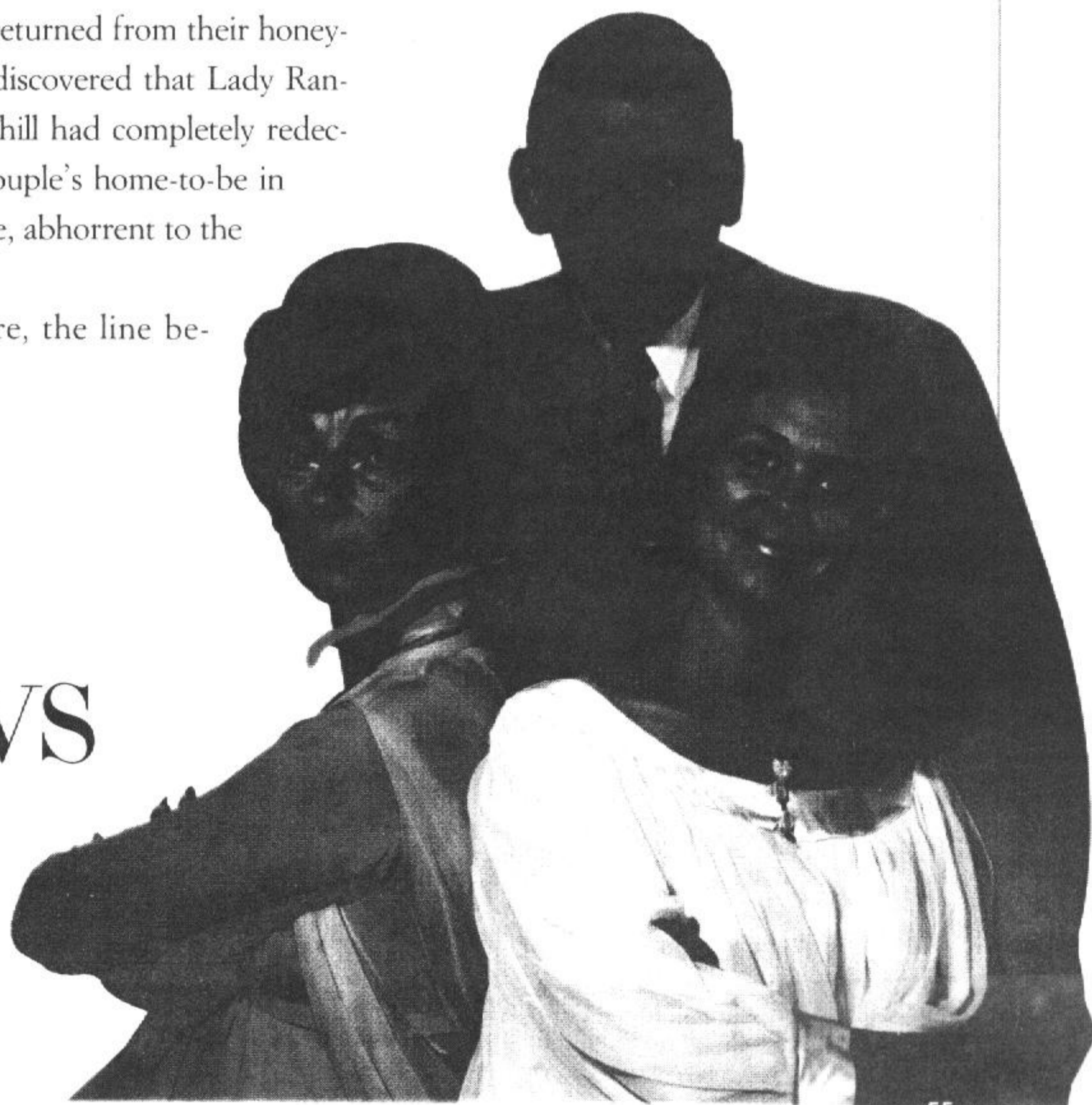
To be sure, the line be-

tween amicability and all-out war can be thin where in-laws are concerned. With practice, though, say experts, you can learn to get along ... and the sooner the better.

Intruding in-laws are a mainstay on the marital trouble list, says Marlene F. Watson, Ph.D., a couples and family therapist in Philadelphia. "Parents never stop being protective or wanting the best for their child." Typically, she explains, one partner may feel that an in-law is interfering and his or her spouse is not doing anything about it. Then, to make matters worse, the spouse feels he or she is being attacked by the partner and pressured

Taming the Wild In-Laws

By Eve
Glicksman



by one or both sets of parents.

"Battle number one is, 'Where's your primary loyalty?'" says Watson, who is also director of the couples and family therapy graduate program at Allegheny University of the Health Sciences in Philadelphia. "Your primary allegiance needs to be with your partner, but you can't exclude parents."

The key to riding out most in-law conflicts is to act as a united couple, Watson says. Both partners need to set up boundaries and communicate them to the in-laws. This could mean asking your moth-

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er not to call before 9:30 a.m. on weekends or telling your father-in-law that your financial affairs are a private matter.

It's also important not to put down your spouse's parent. "This makes the partner defensive and rally to the side of the parent," says Watson. Instead, explain to your mate what the problem is and involve him in suggesting ways to resolve the conflict.

Couples at Risk: Who Isn't?

FEW PEOPLE SAIL INTO IN-LAW relationships without some apprehension and discomfort at first. "The marriage is a transition for everyone," says Watson. "You're bringing together two sets of rules, and each family feels its rules should be followed."

Yet many of these differences are arbitrary and not really important, stresses Michael B. Ascher, Ph.D., a psychologist and professor of psychiatry at Temple University School of Medicine. For instance, while a new bride may disapprove of her in-laws' predinner cocktail ritual, she can learn to accept that it isn't tantamount to alcoholism, he says.

Studies indicate that younger people have more problems relating to their in-laws than those over 35. "Parents and in-laws play a more significant role with

younger people, for whom conflicts about independence and autonomy still exist," Ascher notes.

In-law tensions may erupt as soon as the couple announces the engagement. Parents may feel abandoned and experience anxiety about the impending separation. There may be discomfort about acknowledging their child's sexuality. They may fear adverse changes in the family structure. Or differences in the new in-law may be perceived as a threat or rejection of their own values.

Penny Bilofsky, a Cherry Hill psychotherapist and co-author of *Inlaws/Outlaws: How to Make Peace with His Family and Yours*, encourages newlyweds to reassure their parents. "Heavy doses of 'I love you, I will always love you, and I will always be your child' go a long way toward easing a parent's troubled heart," she writes. "Also, give mother and father a chance to hear about and get to know this person with whom you're planning to build a new life. Don't expect the person you have chosen to be treated like family from day one."

Particularly if the bride is older than her husband, his mother may feel that her daughter-in-law is trying to usurp her role. Or a new wife may become anxious that the undesirable qualities she observes in the father-in-law will be transferred to

the son. And don't overlook potential sibling-in-law problems, says Watson. "Siblings can have as major an impact on the couple as parents. They may call to ask for money, become very protective or take a strong dislike to the in-law."

Before you meet your in-laws, have your fiancé brief you about their likes, dislikes and sensitivities. The added knowledge will reduce the risk of your offending them and enable you to ask questions that engage their interest.

Navigating differences in socioeconomic, educational and cultural backgrounds can be particularly tricky, but "ultimately, it's not the parents' interests that should be the main concern," maintains an interracial couple in Mt. Airy. The May 1997 newlyweds say that both families have accepted

their relationship, although his mother was a little slower in coming around. Mostly, she was concerned that his two daughters from a previous marriage would not accept a stepmother of another race. She was also of the old-fashioned mindset that her divorced son shouldn't remarry.

"Now that we've visited four times, she's getting warmer," the bride reports. "She saw our apartment and sees that her son is being well fed and well cared for. I don't think you can force parents to accept anything right away. His mother invited us to stay over at her house this last visit; before, she sent us to sleep at his grandmother's, who lives nearby."

"My husband and father got to know each other through their shared interest in computers. We started going over for Sunday dinners as a couple almost immediately after they met."

Advises Ascher about differences in race and religion: "Act in a civil, respectful manner and win the parent over through your actions."

Potential Sore Spots

Wedding Planning: If a couple pays for all the arrangements, they may have things exactly as they wish, says Watson. If parents are financing the affair, though, the couple should be prepared to compromise.

Juggling Families: For one Oreland newlywed, the biggest adjustment has

TAKE NOTE

A bridal consultant—unlike a mother or future in-law—is working for the bride's interest and not her own.

— Terri Vaughn, owner, **The Pleasure of Your Company, Philadelphia**

