

Games People Play

by T. LOTTMAN

In truly discouraged marriages games are not single isolated events but rather, they become almost continuous ways of interacting. There soon is little or no relief from the contest to stay "one-up". Even when games seem about to end, often a new game is immediately started to take place. For example, a person who is about to lose an "I'm right - you're wrong" game, frequently avoids defeat by using the "I don't want to discuss it" maneuver. As the evidence against him mounts, he simply announces his refusal to continue this "petty argument" and thereby gives the impression that he is too mature and intelligent to "stoop to such bickering". This is the same individual who moments before was heatedly engaged in the battle.

The most effective "I don't want to discuss it" player also uses some means of physically avoiding his spouse. He buries his head in the newspaper, leaves the room, falls asleep, or even in one case, turns off his hearing aid. These methods of dissociation often infuriate

his partner to the point that she will launch a "this is war" game with all the screaming, door slamming and name calling usually associated with this game. As long as the "I don't want to discuss it" player keeps his cool and doesn't react, this merely reinforces his position of being the one who is too rational, mature, intelligent or moral to get involved in his wife's games. In actuality he is no different than the child who stops in the middle of a race and says "I quit in order to avoid defeat." However in marriages such child's play is really a more serious symptom of discouragement.

One pattern of discouragement in marriages is a desperate form of the "Pay Attention" game. The goal is simply to win the spouse's involvement, no matter whether positive or negative. Arguments even in some cases, physical abuse will satisfy the goals of the "Pay Attention" player, for it is a game of desperation. This game is often played by the spouse who has been discouraged by years of being almost totally ignored by their partner. They feel that in their

partner's eyes they barely exist and any attention is preferable to being ignored. They may begin by trying to gain attention through kindness, efforts to please, and anticipating their spouse's needs. However, when these positive efforts fail, they quickly turn to less constructive maneuvers. Some of the strategies that identify the "Pay Attention" player are:

1. They are never silent in the presence of their spouse or they are so conspicuously silent that their spouse is bothered by it.

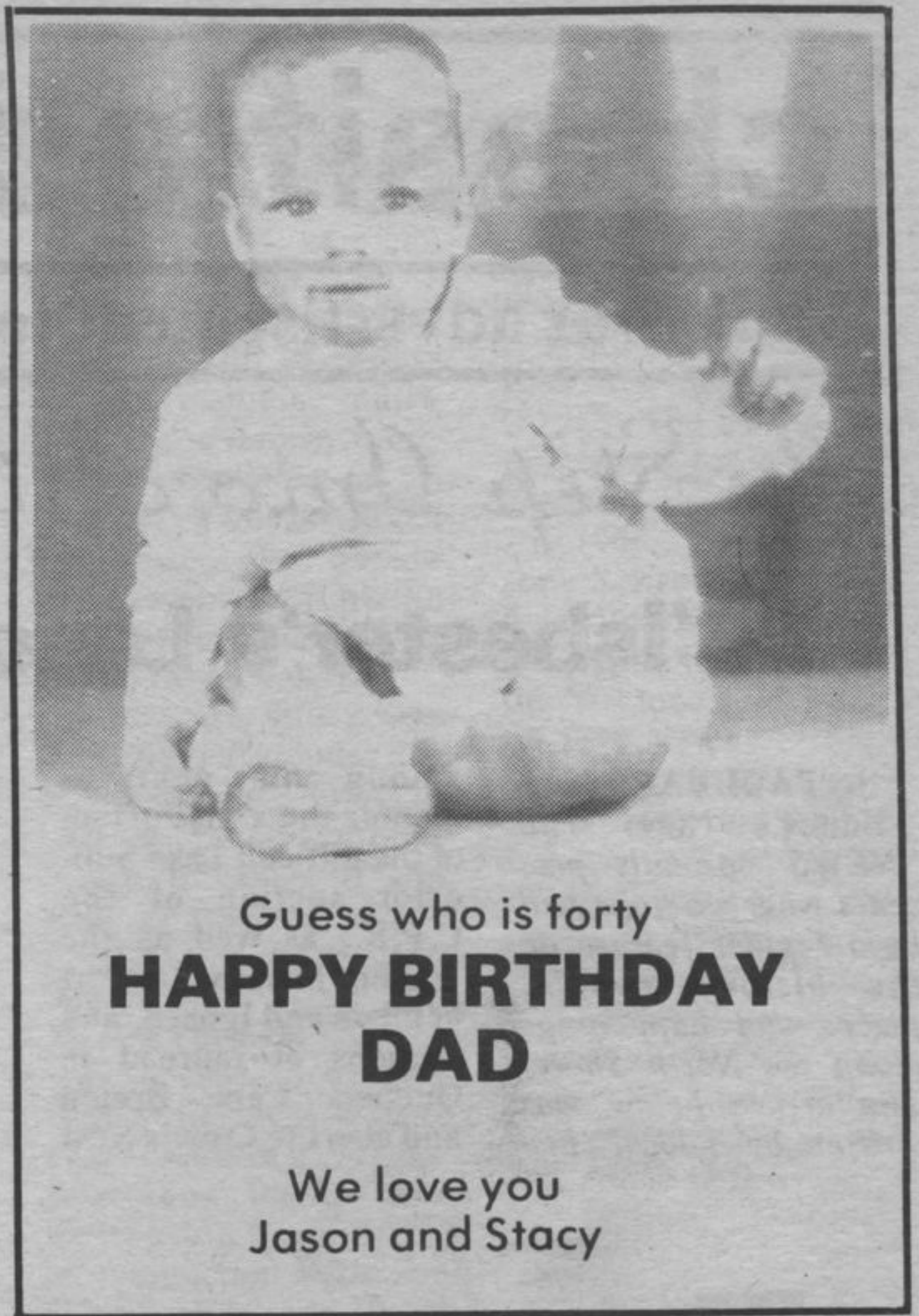
For example, picture a husband arriving home from work. He's

got the paper in one hand and his eye on the couch in front of the t.v. On the way through the kitchen he tosses his wife a "Hi, what's for supper?" Silence. He turns around, marches back to the kitchen and asks, "What's wrong?" His wife continues to stare into the pan of spaghetti sauce, sighs, and replies, "Oh, nothing." He's hooked. There is no way he can leave that situation without feeling like a real jerk. She's won his attention.

2. The "Pay Attention" player always announces what they are going to do before they do it or always asks for token permission from

their spouse. "I think I'll read for a while, d'ya mind?" Even a grunt in response provides an illusion of involvement.

3. Requiring a spouse's help with everything you do also marks the "Pay Attention" player. Even a refusal or a loud complaint is a form of attention that is better than being ignored. Often spouses have little awareness of how powerful a simple kindness, a brief hug, or a short conversation can be in combatting marital discouragement. In a future article we will look at the "Debit-Credit" game and the "Where would you be without me" strategy.



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