

Fred and Annette

Are a few commonalities enough to bind a couple together? Fred is a 35 year old vegetable farmer who maintains some steers on the side and quit school before the end of 8th grade. Annette is 21, finishing college, and taking over the role of herdsman on a dairy farm following her father's passing. They share a love of open skies and independence not found in other roles. Their initial meeting in an alfalfa field, after first crop, while she was trapping pocket gophers, began an unlikely relationship. Although both titled as farmers, Fred and Annette have different ideas on how to accomplish work, and their age spread may have something to do with it.

Fred and Annette are both farmers and yet their specialties differ in the bounty they produce. Fred farms mainly crops and produce as his family had moved away from cattle when he was young, while Annette and her family remained in the dairy cattle industry. Waking with the sun on most mornings, Fred sets the fire blazing to get the coffee pot going at a full boil and methodically adds his ingredients for egg coffee as the pot rumbles and jumps on the stove. Annette had quietly slipped on her clothes in the dark of the morning when everything is still tinged lilac, and regardless of the weather, she completes her first round of the morning; checking for any new calves that the heifers may have birthed overnight. Fred gets his coffee cup down from second shelf in the cupboard, then pauses slightly and goes back to grab another, his shoulder grumbling in protest. Unlike Fred's mug, Annette's cup is hard to mistake among all the Chinese mass produced, straight-sided, white mugs. Her cup of earthen browns, made in northern Wisconsin of hand-thrown clay, begins imperfectly with a squatty base as big around as a large bulb, curving in and then gracefully back out, culminating in a fine lip that is as slim as a rose petal. Fred has the weather channel on the television talking in the background, the day's paper spread open on the table pinned down on one side by an almanac and on the other by his notes from last year. The decision on when to plant potatoes, tomatoes, squash, and corn takes careful planning every year to promote natural health among the varieties while maintaining a steady rotation with no overlaps. Fred's day will be filled with fact finding and planning, as it's too early in the season yet to plant. Annette's day will be like a busy fireman running from fire to fire completing animal well-checks and feeding. Her schedule is largely generalized and usually derailed for all new coming members of the herd. Annette arrives back in the kitchen just as Fred finishes his second cup of coffee. This daily routine began long before they had ever met each other. As farmers they share similar traits, but those are easily dismissed as the 14 year age difference in age is paramount.

Fred is more than a decade older than Annette and it shows in both obvious and more subtle ways. One of the most immediate differences are signs of repeated sun exposure. While both are well tanned to burnished chestnut, the life lines on Fred's face like course grained wood and tiny valleys. The portions of skin not covered by a hat or beard momentarily give the falsehood of smoothness, only to fracture like glass giving new meaning to cracking a smile. Annette displays wrinkles too, though not as often and less intense, as hers are limited to a light spider web of laugh lines. Life's experiences are ingrained and habits learned manifest in slight ways. Fred grew up with competition creating a repeated family phrase: "the one who eats the fastest, gets the most-est." This led to all meals getting a quick check for fish bones, regardless of fish being present in the meal, by pressing food against the roof of the mouth and gulped down, whereas Annette was brought up with a more refined set of manners including meal tempo, place setting, course expectations, posture, and etiquette. Throughout their lives, Fred and Annette had many experiences that helped create their individual uniqueness internally and externally. Their different mannerisms and wide age gap cause people to frequently ponder their compatibility in life and marriage.

Matrimony lasted for 38 years, until Fred's passing in the spring of 2017. Two people can be raised with different family dynamics that create independent individuals who, through their shared love for a farmers' way of life, can be brought together. Although they were never able to blend their farming styles, the attention to detail they used at work was brought home from time to time and applied. Celebrations and activities weren't common occurrences, but Fred always planned well in advance while Annette shot from the hip, taking opportunities as they presented themselves. As the age old saying goes, "It only takes a spark to start a fire." In a similar way, Fred's and Annette's farming background allowed them an opportunity to meet, and that spark blossomed into a lasting relationship.

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