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MARITAL MAGICK

So precarious is the blessed union of marriage that humanity has devised a set of superstitions to enhance its odds of survival

WORDS TONI BENTLEY

The only wedding I have ever attended at which the proceedings didn't make me ache to have sex right then and there—during the ceremony, behind the altar, at the reception in the hotel's men's room, or behind a just-high-enough bush in the garden—was, alas, my own. The utter inappropriateness of lust in the presence of the sanctification of love is both a turn-on and a succinct illustration of the great irony of marriage: the promise of permanence insidiously requires a reduction in the pressing appetites of desire. My own marriage to a great love took an immediate nosedive on our honeymoon, when Tiepolo's Venetian cupolas took precedence over my equally sumptuous Trashy Lingerie get-up. The chase was over, the urgency gone. I spent my 20s feeling like a wanton woman-in-waiting while my beloved thought of higher things.

Despite the fact that in America the divorce rate consistently hovers around 50 percent—and how many who don't divorce are happy?—we insist that love and sex go hand in hand, marrying at vast rates. (We average over 6,000 nuptials per day in the United States alone.) And each ceremony features some, if not many, classic wedding traditions—all based, if one takes a closer look at their origins, on little more than old superstitions that have one aim: to ensure a successful union despite the many obstacles, not least that we are not a monogamous species.

Yet no self-respecting couple would dare to adhere to history, facts, or just plain common sense in the face of the tsunami of traditions surrounding this age-old institution that aims to secure the impossible: that ever-changing, mercurial form of insanity we call love. The pledge doesn't stop there—it promises erotic desire in perpetuity to one person. This paradox is astonishing, for sexual excitement is born in the opposite—in the unknown—and thrives on insecurity, risk, and barely manageable levels of anxiety.

One might do better to marry at least two people—the good man and the bad boy, the Madonna and the whore—or at least grandfather in the former lovers.

Entering a marriage with the hope of everlasting love to one fallible person—I can hardly breathe just writing this—is likely the biggest commitment with the least guarantee that one can ever make. Thus the imperative to conjure the unconjurable: luck. The traditions of marriage are theatrical rituals that attempt to allay the apprehension of doing something so unlikely. The poet John Tottenham observes “entering into a relationship is like moving to a small town.”

Let's take a closer look. Wear something old—to tie the past to the present, not always a good idea. I wore, at the suggestion of my fiancé, his mother's wedding dress, despite its being too big. I think Dr. Freud would have had something to say about this particular choice. Underneath I wore something else that was old: a gorgeous white lace thong, used so effectively with previous lovers. Something new to represent the couple's future—my diamond engagement ring sufficed. As for something borrowed from another happy couple—I knew none, so had to skip this one. (Maybe this was where things started to go wrong?) My something blue, symbolizing fidelity: my thong had a tiny blue bow at its summit.

And what about that voluminous veil? It is to disguise the bride from jealous spirits who would kidnap her from the altar and later, when the groom carries her across the threshold, it thwarts a last-ditch effort by those pesky spirits—who clearly failed in their first mission—to prevent consummation, this time by entering through the soles of the bride's feet. These days, of course, that particular bird likely flew the coop on either the first or third date depending if the woman is naughty or nice.

Why is the fourth finger of the left hand

the ring finger? It was thought that a vein in that finger led to the heart. Lordy, it sure is a relief to have such good insurance for such a perilous undertaking.

Why does the bride stand to the groom's left at the altar? So that his right hand can fend off other suitors. I say bring them on and may the best man win; it is so depressing for a gal to suddenly feel undesired just because she marries. Besides, surely the properly motivated will simply grab the bride from her unguarded left side. In medieval times, however, a crowd accompanied the newlyweds to the bedchamber, tore off the bride's clothes, and secured a scrap of her gown as their own token of good luck. Brutal. Not my kind of orgy. And so not #MeToo, either.

It is worth noting that virtually all of these traditions are based in the patriarchal code that the bride is the groom's possession, and yet most modern women still adhere to these customs, reconfirming, in unconscious hypocrisy, their status as chattel.

Here's my favorite myth: it is said to be good luck for the bride to cry on her wedding day as her tears will be her last, since she is entering matrimonial bliss. But, as all of us girls who have ever married know, marriage is too often the beginning of not only a long vale of tears, but tears of an entirely different order: the tears that signify the breaking of the illusion of perfect love—whatever that is—which is the third great disappointment in a bride's married life, the second being, according to Oscar Wilde, Niagara Falls. You know the first. So many traditions based on superstition upon superstition. One might easily conclude that marriage itself is the ultimate superstition.

In case you're wondering: I stayed married and faithful and devoted to that beautiful man for 10 years, so strong is the dream. But when I left, I gave that magnificent Trashy Lingerie thingamajig a proper outing. ♥