

WHY KNOT?

One writer's look into the unexpected evolution of marriage.

By MAX FAWCETT
PHOTOGRAPH BY PEDERSEN

Distracted driving laws are common across North America, but few to my knowledge cover talking about marriage with your sixty-eight year old father while behind the wheel. Still, as my rented black 2009 Chevy Impala shuddered to a stop on the Santa Ana Freeway in early September, just short of the expensive-looking silver SUV in front of me, it occurred to me this was perhaps an oversight on the part of lawmakers. I've never been in an accident, yet this discussion nearly caused an embarrassing and possibly even dangerous collision. It was distracting in the extreme. The drivers behind me were paying better attention than I was—and were probably not listening to

the idiosyncratic relationship opinions of a parent—so a collision was avoided. I managed to veer into the open lane to my right, narrowly missing a car merging left, and we carried on our way.

We were driving the sixty or so kilometres from Santa Monica to Anaheim to take in a Los Angeles Angels baseball game, and while the prospect of leaving the beach and heading inland to watch teams fading out of the playoff picture might have otherwise sounded like a waste of time, both my father and I knew it was worth it to get a look at the Angels' exciting rookie centre fielder, Mike Trout.

I was in Los Angeles to visit my older brother Jesse and his newborn daughter Matisse, but I'd also wanted

to spend some time with my father. The baseball game had seemed the easiest way to make it happen—the sport has always been a language we use to communicate. He'd taught me how to throw a baseball and coached my Little League team, but our relationship with the game ran deeper than that. We'd routinely quiz each other on the sport's statistical highlights, trying to stump each other on who held the record for the most doubles or the lowest earned run average in a season. (His go-to question was always Ty Cobb's career batting average, and to this day, for some reason, I still can't remember it.) Mike Trout, however, was something of a red herring, because the trip, for me, was not strictly about baseball. It was also about marriage.

Of all the relationships that I'd grown up with, the one between my father and his fourth wife Leanna was not one I expected to end in divorce. But it had, which was why I wanted to find out what kind of shape my father was in. Based on the increasingly negative tenor of the phone calls and emails we'd exchanged over the preceding few months—as what looked like an amicable separation turned into an acrimonious divorce (a war, he called it)—I'd expected to find a broken man when I circled around LAX's Terminal Two looking for him.

I'd already made one pass through the arrivals level, but I hadn't seen anyone who looked like my dad. On the second pass, I slowed the car down for a closer look, and spotted someone who looked a bit like my dad, only if he were being played by an actor. As I pulled up, I was immediately reminded of one of Louis CK's stand-up observations. "Let me explain something—divorce is always good news. I know that sounds weird, but it's true, because no good marriage has ever ended in divorce. It's really that simple." Judging by the appearance of the man who finally approached the car after I'd honked at him two or three times, Louis CK had a point. It was my father, not an actor. He'd lost at least forty pounds, and with his white hair, a partially unbuttoned turquoise dress shirt, an Armani sports coat, and a pair of Italian looking amber-tinted sunglasses, he looked more like a Hollywood director than a marital war-zone refugee from Toronto.

I popped the trunk. He deposited his bags, slammed the trunk shut, then quickly opened the passenger door and got in.

"Hey, kiddo," he said. "Good to see you. What's new?"

"Me? Not much," I said. "You're the one with stuff going on, remember?"

He reluctantly did up his seat belt at the car's ding-donging insistence, and turned towards the window. "Yeah," he said. "Tell me about it."

I HAD PREPARED FOR THIS TRIP, THIS MOMENT, BY doing something I'd sworn I'd never do: read *Gender Wars*. It's a book my dad wrote (the fifteenth of his twenty-two-books) when he was going through his last divorce about twenty years ago; it's a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction that covered, among other things, proper

oral sex technique and the intricacies of the male orgasm. More broadly, it was an attempt in the early nineties to explain what heterosexual males were thinking at a time when society—literate society, anyways—wasn't very interested in the subject. I'd read almost everything my father had written and enjoyed most of it, but had been warned off *Gender Wars* by my mother, who is clearly the inspiration for one of the characters in the book (and who, mercifully, has no sex scenes) and my friend Stephen, who I'd asked to read it for me some years ago.

In retrospect, I wish I'd read it sooner. It's by no means my favourite of his books, but while reading *Gender Wars* exposed me to the unpleasant fact that my father had opinions—strong ones, even—on subjects like group sex and erections, it also gave me my first glimpse into what things had been like for my parents, and why their relationship had fallen apart so quickly.

Because they had broken up years before my brain started to form long-term memories, I never had any sense of what their marriage had been like. They met in 1976, married in 1978, and were done by December of 1980, before my first birthday. The only evidence I had that they'd been together at all was a few grainy photographs. One had them sitting on a sandstone beach on Gabriola Island, my mother pregnant and visibly radiating contempt at my father sitting next to her, shirtless and petulant. The other is of their wedding day, with everyone clothed in the hideous palette of brown and earth tones that was popular at the time. Neither looks particularly happy to be getting married.

Those pictures were all I'd ever known about their relationship before I finally read *Gender Wars*. One passage describes the relationship between Ferris, a character based on my father, and Annie, who is even more obviously a riff on my mother. "Most of their friends, separately, had been vocally against it [the marriage]. It became a joke between them—to the point where they made a list of objectors and tacked it onto the kitchen bulletin board. But when it came down to planning the wedding reception, they kept the guest list short." In retrospect, they probably should have listened to those friends.

I knew the drive to the ball game would take at least an hour, and I wanted to use the time to ask my dad why he was getting his fourth divorce, and whether he'd be willing to put himself in the position of risking a fifth. I suppose I was also hoping that in the process, I'd learn something about myself, about whether I'd ever be able to tie the knot, about why, after everything that had gone on in my family, I was still living with the hope that one day I'd marry.

For most people that might seem like a silly thing to think, or say, given that the only legal restrictions on marriage cover fairly common-sense things such as not being allowed to marry your sister or your pet gerbil. Yet my uncertainty has more to do with my own capacity for success (whether that capacity is genetic or learned) than my ability to try. When I visited him in Los Angeles, my father was on the verge of signing off on that fourth divorce and my mother has herself been divorced four times. If you draw the circle wider to include my two aunts and my two uncles, the number of divorces in the family increases to sixteen. Six adults. Sixteen divorces. A stark reminder that whatever traits I may have inherited from both sides of my family, whether nature or nurture, the capacity for getting married is very high but the ability to stay married appears to have been erased from our gene pool.

Growing up, I treated this mutant family tree, all stunted branches and criss-crossing limbs, as a badge of honour, the familial equivalent of owning a snake or having an uncle in the circus (true story: my father's first three ex-wives worked, for a short period, at the same time at the same small college-turned-university in North Vancouver). I was never jealous of friends whose parents were still together, although I didn't actually know of many. It was simply the way things were, and I never considered the possibility that it had, or would have, any material impact on my own life.

Yet for all the colourful examples I'd seen of why marriage didn't work, it was always clear to me growing up that there was not necessarily a logical connection between these failed marriages and my own odds of getting married. Whenever I tried to imagine my future, what I'd be like twenty or thirty years down the road, it always included a ring on my finger. Yes, I built in the assumption that it was

possible I'd get divorced once or twice along the way, but I never soured on the idea of marriage.

It's possible this is willful blindness or simple human optimism, or a combination of both, but what is clear is that I'm not alone. A great deal of attention in our society is paid to the declining number of people who make it to the altar, but insufficient attention is devoted to the fact that, despite what seems a growing number of reasons not to, many people still walk down the aisle.

It is true that, as Andrew J. Cherlin, a professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University and the author of *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, points out, we have witnessed a radical transformation in the role marriage plays in society. Fundamentally, he writes, marriage has evolved from an obligation to an option. Co-habitation has become a viable and widely-accepted alternative, and those who choose it are not subject to the same kind of punitive cultural shaming they would have experienced two generations earlier.

But given that marriage is now optional, it becomes even more intriguing to consider why it is that the majority of people still take it up. As a 2011 article in the *Journal of Family Issues* noted, "We find little evidence of a decline in the importance of marriage among young people during their prime family formation years. Overwhelmingly, young people insist they value marriage, and the unmarried respondents express a desire to wed at some point in their lives."

In *Gender Wars*, with a third divorce under his belt, my father had been understandably cynical about the institution of marriage. "In the latter part of the twentieth century," he'd written, "most marriages are short, banal experiences or long, obscure co-dependencies. The institution is fouled by obsolete romantic expectations that are generally exhausted before the marriage vows are mumbled, and the rituals have been supplanted by legal statutes that sanctify little more than the accumulation and disposal of property, tax avoidance schemes, and wildly insensitive procedures for protecting children when the marriage blows apart."

I wanted to ask him how he could square that perspective with his decision

to get married a fourth time—and dedicate the book to that fourth wife, no less—but I had begun fighting a pitched battle with my car's GPS. It kept forcing me off the highway and onto side roads that would immediately re-connect with the freeway, and while I was tempted to ignore its advice after the third such incident, my near-accident made me unusually co-operative. Still, we had a good twenty minutes before we got to Anaheim, and after the GPS told me to go straight for eleven miles I figured I had time to ask a few questions about the apparent discrepancy between his words and his deeds.

"I'd been married all those times," he told me, "but I just went along with it because the people I was living with needed that. But in a curious way, I bought in with Leanna. I really felt married, and I stopped screwing around and stopped looking around, oddly. I fell in love at forty-eight. Who knew?"

He was hurt by the divorce, and full of both anger and frustration over what the marriage had cost him personally and professionally. But he was also, surprisingly, less cynical about the idea of marriage than he had been in the book he'd written before he'd gotten blindsided by this latest divorce. "Sure, I could have been a bit more suspicious," he told me, "and I wouldn't have gotten hit so hard. But if you live that way, you might as well go shoot yourself. Sometimes you've got to let it all hang out. And I did, and for ten years it was pretty fabulous."

"Do you think you'll ever get married again," I asked him, purposely (and purposefully) keeping my eyes on the road.

"If it was the right woman," he said, pausing briefly before finishing. "And with a pre-nup."

CENSUS DATA IS RARELY AN OCCASION FOR controversy, but when the 2011 Census data on households was released in September 2012 it made its way to both the front and back pages of most newspapers in Canada. On the front, the stories talked about the radically changing face of the average Canadian family, with the percentage of Canadians living in common-law relationships on the rise and the proportion of traditional nuclear families yet again on the decline. The op-eds and columns in the

back pages spoke to the meaning of this change, speculating as to whether or not it spelled the end of marriage as the predominant means of familial organization.

What the pundits failed to consider, however, is the institution of marriage's demonstrated capacity for evolution and adaptation. Over the course of the last century, marriage has changed from a method of either transmitting or acquiring social, cultural and economic power to an opportunity for self-determination and expression. It's been a radical and speedy evolution. Furthermore, where marriage was once a form of social and political repression that limited the rights and capacities of women, it has recently been adopted as a tool by certain marginalized groups, such as the gay community, who have used it to advance the cause of functional, legal and moral equality. Marriage may stake claims on being enduring and eternal, and sometimes perhaps it is, but in reality it is proving to be an adaptable and even pliant social tool.

Few people understand this better than Stephanie Coontz, who teaches history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Washington State. Coontz is the director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families and has written or co-edited a number of books on the history of marriage and the family. While the latest census data is in keeping with trends she's noticed in her research, she doesn't think marriage deserves a spot on the endangered species list just yet. "We're certainly never going to go back to the kind of stability you had when there were few options outside of marriage and women were economically dependent on men, and there was a lot of social stigma attached to being outside of marriage," she said, when I reached her by phone earlier this fall. "But one of the interesting ironies—unexpected, to most people—is that as women have gotten more clout, and to the extent that men have changed along with them, you're actually seeing an increase in marital satisfaction and longevity."

The numbers bear that out. While divorce rates spiked in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties as women in Canada and the United States had, and accessed, the newfound option to leave unsatisfactory marriages (two-thirds of

divorces in both Canada and the United States are initiated by women), that number has started to come down in recent years. According to Coontz's research, every generation since the Baby Boomers (those born roughly between 1946 and 1961) has had a better chance of reaching their fifteenth wedding anniversary than the one that came before them. In other words, census data may reveal that fewer people are getting married but the ones who do seem to be making it last longer.

The single biggest reason for this decline in the divorce rate, according to Harvard's Dana Rotz, is that people are waiting longer to tie the knot. Beginning in the nineteen-seventies, the median age at which people first married began to rise noticeably, increasing by almost five years from 1970 until the early aughts. For example, in 1979—the year that I was born—the average age at which men and women got married was 24.4 and 22.1 years old, respectively. By 2011, those had increased to 28.7 and 26.5.

This is partially a function of higher costs of living and a greater emphasis on post-secondary education, factors which, when combined with the growing social acceptance of cohabitation, have encouraged young people to be more cautious about getting married. But it's also a reflection of the fact that, for people my age, marriage is increasingly coming to be seen as a reflection of adulthood rather than a prerequisite to it. Today, couples often delay marriage in order to pay off debts, advance careers, buy a house and do any other number of things, including having children, that used to happen after the wedding ceremony. Marriage, Cherlin says, has become the capstone to adulthood, not its foundation.

That wasn't the case when my mother, Leslie, first married in 1969, to a manic depressive poet named David. Nor was it the case when she divorced him and married a swinging Gastown lawyer named Ted Seifred, who turned out to be a much better friend than husband later in his life (he died in 1989). It wasn't the case when she divorced him and ended up marrying my father, Brian, in 1978. And while the capstone trend had probably been established by the time she married for the fourth time in 1998, to an indifferent fifty-something graduate



CAN·ICONS

SAME SEX MARRIAGE

Canada was the first country in the world to perform a legal same-sex marriage. On January 14, 2001, Elaine and Anne Vautour, and Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell were married in Toronto in a double wedding. Initially, the ceremony was legally contested, but it was affirmed by the Ontario government two years later. It was a milestone in Canadian civil rights history.

After Ontario's same-sex marriage decision, and numerous cross-country constitutional challenges, other provinces followed suit. In response to these changes in provincial law, and to growing demand from Canadians, Prime Minister Jean Chretien announced that the federal government would present a new marriage act. On June 28, 2005, same-sex marriage was legalized across the land.

The legalization of same-sex marriage had many implications for Canada. But among these was the proof that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, brought into law in 1982, was gradually guiding the country towards greater justice for all.

Many Canadians also experienced this as a new beginning for the country. The shift in national attitudes towards majority acceptance of same-sex marriage revealed a heightened level of national confidence. It seemed Canadians could make up their own minds. We took the first step forward, boldly leading the world instead of looking outward for guidance. In fact, same-sex marriage has become a major political issue in the U.S.A., where both sides now seem to gaze northwards—whether to declaim or to praise Canada's maverick ways.

—Clive Holden

student with a propensity for suspicious internet activity, it was too late for it to be of much use to her.

I'd never asked my mother about her marriages or divorces, but when I visited her in Vancouver two weeks before going to Los Angeles I decided it was finally time.

"There's no reason for me to have been married four times," she told me. "It defies logic, it's absolutely ludicrous, and if there's anything I was ever embarrassed about that would be it."

I asked her why'd she'd done it, then, get married time after time.

"In those days just about everyone we knew got married. Everybody started out living together and they ended up married. It was just what you did."

The statistics about marriage and divorce at the time reflect what she said, but, as I pointed out to her, not everyone—in fact, hardly anyone—did it four times.

"I think you get married," she told me, "because you think it will stabilize your relationship or make it more mean-

ingful or give it more substance, but it doesn't." She'd gotten married, she said, because, in part, she thought it would make her first husband more stable, her second more grounded, her third (my father) more faithful, and her fourth more interesting. She'd been wrong each time.

If we view these as less than sound reasons to get married today, it might be because we have grown accustomed, in not much more than a generation, to viewing marriage as a deliberative rather than a pragmatic act. This was not the case when my mother first married. In a 1967 poll of American college women, two-thirds said that they would consider marrying someone they didn't love if that person met other key criteria. The average couple of the day married after knowing each other for just six months, and many approached it with the same sense of dutiful resignation as a trip to the dentist. "There was this sense that marriage is what you do," said Stephanie

Coontz, "and if they seemed to be a good provider and a kind person on the one hand and good wife material on the other, you might as well go for it."

Young couples marrying today tend not to see it that way. Rather than a pragmatic domestic alliance between stereotypes, marriage has become, or at least is moving clearly towards becoming, a mutually beneficial partnership between equals. Not that that makes it any easier. Coontz pointed out that these new, modern marriages among the younger generations can be more fulfilling, but they also take longer to build. "I think most young people do want to get married," she said, "but they no longer feel it's socially or economically necessary. So they're going to be much pickier."

My mother, for her part, doesn't necessarily regret any of her marriages—the first three, anyhow—though she'd be quite capable of ranking them in order of personal preference. But would she marry each man again today, if given the choice and the chance?

"No," she told me, adding for emphasis, as if I hadn't understood, "no way."

MATHEMATICALLY-DRIVEN EXPLANATIONS OF

the universe have always held great appeal for me, which may explain my lifelong interest in baseball. But I did not expect to find, in my research, a mathematically derived explanation for why some marriages succeed and others fail, much less a predictive model based on one. True, I'd come across a group of Swedish researchers who'd discovered a link between levels of arginine vasopressin (a hormone in mammals that helps them retain water and which has been linked to mate stability in prairie voles) and certain marital outcomes. This discovery, such as it was, raised the interest level among many observers that someday human beings (let's be honest here: men) could be tested for a monogamy gene, but researchers quickly dismissed the idea that there was a casual relationship that could be mined for predictive purposes.

Indeed, the futility of the search for a scientific basis for marital success was unintentionally underscored by *New York Times* journalist Tara Parker-Pope's 2010 book *For Better: How the Surprising Science of Happy Couples Can Help Your Marriage Succeed*. The book was, in a way, a metaphor for the entire industry—and

it is an industry—of marriage-oriented self-help literature, more heavily weighted towards pseudo-scientific quizzes and regurgitated conventional wisdoms than any actual science. In her assessment of the book, *Washington Post* reviewer Carolyn See described the book as being full of "kooky non-knowledge." Not exactly *The Origin of Species*, in other words.

But perhaps looking for a predictive genetic or cultural marker is the wrong approach, like trying to isolate which single ingredient makes a good stew taste the way it does. Maybe a good marriage, like good food, is a holistic phenomenon, and efforts to break it down into its constituent parts are doomed to fail from the very beginning. Maybe instead of looking for the crucial ingredient, a pinch of salt or sprig of thyme, we should be trying to create a recipe. That's what a University of Washington psychologist named John Gottman, now retired with professor emeritus status, has been doing for more than two decades, using his laboratory as a kind of test kitchen to develop the recipe for a successful marriage. And if the results of some of his studies are any indication, his palate has gotten very, very good.

Gottman's work attracted the attention of Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote about him in his 2005 book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. Gladwell describes Gottman's unique approach to studying marriage, one in which he videotapes couples and assigns codes to the emotions expressed during their interaction. "Disgust, for example, is 1," writes Gladwell, "contempt is 2, anger is 7, defensiveness is 10, whining is 11, sadness is 12, stonewalling is 13, neutral is 14, and so on. Gottman has taught his staff how to read every emotional nuance in people's facial expressions and how to interpret seemingly ambiguous bits of dialogue."

The product of those accumulated scores (along with physical indicators such as body temperature and heart rate) was, Gladwell wrote, an ability to actually predict the likelihood that the marriage under study would end in divorce or not. "If he analyzes an hour of a husband and wife talking, he can predict with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will still be married fifteen years later. If he watches a couple for fifteen minutes, his success rate is around 90 percent."

Gottman runs a for-profit therapist training school called the Gottman Relationship Institute, and, rather than enrolling, I decided to speak with someone who had. Dr. Peter Williamson is one of two Gottman-trained therapists in the downtown Vancouver, and I met him in his small north-facing apartment in the city's west end. His living room doubles as a second office, and looked as if it had been outfitted with a therapist's all-in-one starter kit: Eastern spiritual influences (statue of Buddha), plush leather couch, wall of framed diplomas, absence of accessible stabbing implements. Dr. Williamson himself was straight out of central casting, with a salt-and-pepper goatee, tan slacks, and a slight paunch.

But these appearances proved deceiving. Dr. Williamson was forthright and charming as he explained why he believed in Dr. Gottman's research. He'd had his eye on Gottman's work for many years before deciding to embrace the approach after realizing something was missing from the so-called conventional approaches. "The research he had done knocked me over," said Williamson.

One of the most pointed aspects of Gottman's research—his recipe, if you will—was the idea that conflict and a healthy marriage aren't mutually exclusive. "Expect problems and differences," Dr. Williamson told me when I asked what single piece of advice he'd give to newlyweds. "One of the biggest spikes in divorce rates comes four to seven years in, and that's the time when people have let down their hair enough. Everyone puts their best foot forward in the beginning."

More interesting was the fact that trying to downplay differences or even refusing to acknowledge that they exist—a feature of many marriages—is an almost certain path to failure. "When people break up, when they're broken up, they'll say that they had too many differences—if they're being civilized—but in fact that's not usually what it was, because everyone has differences," Dr. Williamson said. "What Gottman's research shows is that people who stay together often have just as many differences as the people who split up. The difference is in how they handle their differences."

Dr. Williamson, who'd been divorced once himself and is now living common-

law with his current partner, then told me to abandon the idea of finding that one true meant-for-me soul mate. This concept had always given me trouble, partly because the odds are so clearly against it, and partly because there's no way to ever objectively confirm it. "There are many, many people out there who would be better than fine for us, and with whom, if we're both putting our best foot forward, would seem like soul mates," he said.

This wasn't quite what I was expecting to hear from a marriage therapist. I suppose I thought he would be slightly less dispassionate about it all, although perhaps even the most optimistic person would eventually tilt that way if they had to work with dysfunctional couples every day. But if his advice addressed some questions, it raised a larger one: If it's all a matter of just getting over differences in a mature way and choosing one person amongst many who suit you—all of which sounds perfectly sensible—then why doesn't everyone do it that way? If the best way to construct a successful relationship is through pragmatism and communication, why do so many people still go through the process of getting married, a process highlighted by a symbolic act of communion that is anything but pragmatic? Why do we still do it? And why, despite my intimate knowledge of all this, do I want to as well?

THESE QUESTIONS WERE STILL WITH ME WHEN I landed in Los Angeles, not least because before heading there I'd done my own internal cost-benefit analysis of marriage that didn't exactly recommend it. Yes, there are some economic benefits associated with cost-sharing, along with the social support that comes from sharing a home and a life with someone. But these are just as easily achieved through cohabitation as marriage.

The benefits of a marriage on one's health, both physical and emotional, are also tenuous. There is, for example, some circumstantial evidence from studies of married couples that it can lower your blood pressure, reduce your risk for dementia and strokes, and even make your immune system stronger. But there's also evidence that a bad marriage can be detrimental to your health. A 2000 study published in the *Journal of the American*

FROM THE MAUD POEMS

I Was Just Frosted

Thanks, Ray, this is just what the doctor ordered.

No, you never see me have one with olives – your father likes olives but I can't stand them.

No, cocktail onions are just picked small. Turn that down, Dan.

Avocados, toothpicks. Coleus, root sprawl.

The diffident glints of a late-day sun, rays

splintered by leaves: they shake and, in their

shaking, streak the light. Transparent murk

of glasses at the glass.

Would you move just one inch over? There. The light was in my eye.

Medical Association found that women who reported marital strain were nearly three times more likely to die of heart disease or suffer heart attacks than those in healthier relationships. Those findings were backed up by a 2006 study that was published in the *American Journal of Cardiology*, which also showed a correlation between marital distress and physical ailment.

A lasting marriage won't necessarily create emotional benefits, either. Michigan State University psychology associate professor Richard E. Lucas (aided by colleagues) parsed a study of more than 24,000 German individuals that took place over the course of fifteen years, and they discovered that while those who got and stayed married were happier than those who didn't, they also reported a high degree of happiness prior to tying the knot. In other words, while there might be a correlation between marriage and happiness, it's not clear that it's the getting married part that produces

the happiness.

Moreover, while Lucas and his colleagues noted a boost in the reported happiness levels associated with getting married, it was both small and short-lived. According to the original study, married couples saw an increase in their reported happiness levels of just one-tenth of a point on an 11-point scale, a bump that disappeared before the bills for the wedding were paid off. The study's authors wrote, that, on average most people were no more satisfied in their lives after marriage than they were before marriage.

In "Reexamining the Case For Marriage," a paper published in the January 2012 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Cornell University's Kelly Musick and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Larry Bumpass found little to recommend marriage over living common law. "Where there were statistically significant differences," they wrote, "marriage was not always more advantageous than cohabitation: The married fared better in health

Splitting Hairs

I learned how to make ring tum ditty when your father and I didn't have two cents to rub together.

Well, these Saltines are a little stale.

You don't have to finish it, but no dessert if you don't.

You want the sound turned down, wound

low, the dial on the dash cranked off. You

want no utterance, and peace, and a clear,

unwheezing breathing.

He was sick as a horse this morning but now he's just feeling a little punk.

Don't you wash that down the sink!

than cohabitators, but the opposite was true of happiness and self-esteem."

The institution of marriage, then, would appear to offer no clear financial, emotional, or physiological advantages over cohabitation. And yet, marriage remains an overwhelmingly popular choice among people my age. Why? For all the cultural commentary around the waning popularity of marriage and the rise of alternatives, Stephanie Coontz points out that more than eighty percent of people still report a desire to get married, and better than eight in ten will end up acting on that desire at some point in their lives. That's certainly down from the highs of the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, but it's not as low as one might expect either given the loosening of cultural norms and the growing acceptance of common-law relationships. "Marriage has really lost its privileged place in people's lives, and cohabitation seems to have been accepted as a real long-term alternative to it," said Coontz. "But I think in most western soci-

eties, and particularly in the United States and most of Canada, marriage continues to be people's shorthand for the highest expression of commitment that they can make."

Perhaps this is the key point, most particularly for a younger generation now entering the marrying years: is marriage today "the highest expression of commitment" people feel they're capable of making? And if so, why? Is it because our world has become so torn and fragmented at every level—with the fear of terrorism, climate change, tribalism, digitalization, financial turmoil, career impermanence—that we are now hungry for ties that bind, for the kind of connections and certainties our world used to provide for us? (Whether or not these past connections were themselves authentic and trustworthy is a topic for another day.)

It certainly seems, to my eye, that the search for a higher expression of commitment is why my older half-brother Jesse decided to get married a few years ago. It

was something of an unexpected development, given that he wasn't exactly an ideal candidate for marriage in the first place. He liked to travel, he valued his independence, and, of course, he was carrying the same compromised marital heritage as me (although his mother has one fewer divorce than mine). He'd even been in a successful rock band at one point and spent the better part of his twenties and thirties chasing waves around the world, neither of which are alluded to in the literature as predictors of marital stability.

And yet, somehow, the relationship he has with his wife Carla is about as close as you can get in the twenty-first century to an ideal marriage. Before they decided to get married they had tended to their careers, hung out with their friends, built their investments, and waited patiently for the time to come, whenever that would be. They'd even battle-tested their relationship by spending a year traveling around the world together. While in Los Angeles, I asked him how, exactly, he'd managed to end up in what appeared, from the outside, to be a happy marriage. It was not a comfortable conversation. Pressing one's parents on a subject as emotionally fraught as marriage—their failed marriages, to be precise—might be difficult, but at least those were *past* experiences. My brother's marriage, on the other hand, was still a going concern, and my worry lay in the fear that he'd tell me things weren't as good as they seemed.

We sat on his third-floor deck in Santa Monica while he watered his plants and worked on his tan. I wasn't surprised when he told me that his marriage worked because he'd met the right woman, given that she was sleeping on the futon in the next room with the window open. But his body language said he was telling the truth. What he said next surprised me, until he'd finished, by which time it seemed obvious. "It's actually easier being in a married relationship than an unmarried one," he told me, "because it isn't like you're negotiating every day to be in a relationship. You *are* in a relationship—there's no question about it any more. It's actually a great freedom. I didn't expect that. I thought it was going to be the opposite, that it would come with all these obligations. But it's actually quite liberating. And enjoyable."

Wild Goose Chase

Oh dear. Would you pick that up, I dropped it.

Ray, don't make it too stiff. Myr's coming over to drop off the blueprints and she might like to join us.

He's been a real pest all afternoon so he's in the doghouse. Dan! You can come out, but watch your p's and q's or –

Stanchion where a rope marks off the object.

Wallpaper, striped: a slippery floor. A

guard. In his element. Indices. And the

long, slow tumble of snow.

Good Lord, it's hotter than Hades in here!

–Susan Wheeler

The notion that marriage could be enjoyable wouldn't be as surprising to many as it was to me. Jesse and I had internalized our parents' various divorces in different ways, he by being loyal to the women he formed long-term relationships with, and me by assiduously avoiding ever getting into a long-term relationship. I've never even come close, and have always found a reason to end relationships before they truly get started. When I couldn't find a good enough reason, I'd behaved badly enough that the other person did the dirty work for me.

Later that evening, after the ball game, heading back to Santa Monica with my father, I told him about how Jesse had defined a successful marriage, or at least, his.

"Jesse's right," my father said. "For any relationship to work at this point in history, the easy shit has to be easy, because the hard stuff is really fucking hard."

My brother isn't necessarily an outlier, either. Indeed, his relationship with his

wife is an ideal representation of what's best about the new marital paradigm. It's one that, for all the cultural noise about the fact that fewer people are getting married today than a generation ago, should give the marital cynics pause. Today's marriages might be fewer, but they're almost certainly better. Case in point: While men with the most rigid patriarchal beliefs used to have lower divorce rates than so-called "unconventional" men, today that's been turned on its head. "Marital satisfaction," says Stephanie Coontz, "is higher and divorce risk lower among couples who have more egalitarian, flexible gender attitudes."

All of this has created a fascinating paradox, she adds. The things that make a marriage potentially fairer, more rewarding, more intimate, more sexually satisfying than ever before, also make it "much more fragile." Put differently, the existence of alternatives, of choices, of negotiable roles and flexible arrangements, and the opportunity that both partners have to

exercise them—the very things that can create the conditions for a divorce—are also what make a contemporary marriage worth staying in. And the fact that more and more people are managing to do so speaks to our improving ability to make peace with this paradox. The institution of marriage, writ large, is undeniably less common, and therefore possibly weaker, than it was even a generation ago. But, ironically, the marriages of today appear to be both better and more durable.

For people my age this is particularly true. Marriage is no longer the main course in our social and cultural lives. Instead, it's an elegant but entirely optional garnish. Yet the fact that it is no longer an economic or cultural obligation makes it mean more, not less. Unlike my parents, who felt dragooned into getting married by cultural and social pressures before realizing that they had made a mistake (or, as it happened, another one) I get to make that choice—when, to whom, or not at all—unencumbered by their expectations or anyone else's.

And like so many people my age, I'm still looking forward to making it. Possibly that's because marriage has evolved from an economic necessity into an aspirational exercise, a challenge willingly met rather than a process silently endured. Or maybe it's because I want to defy my background and do what my parents couldn't. Perhaps it's because, in our splintered, random, deracinated world, it actually *is* the highest expression of commitment one person can make to another.

I was thinking about all of this when I dropped my rental car back off at the airport, headed through customs and tucked into a mediocre breakfast at LAX while waiting for my flight home. It had been three years since my father, my brother and I had been in the same city together, and with Jesse and Carla's new baby it seemed likely to be a while before it happened again. As I listened to the speakers blaring out gate changes for travellers heading all over the planet, I couldn't help but wonder if the next time I saw my father and brother together would be at another wedding. I hoped it wouldn't be my brother's, but could easily imagine it being my father's. Maybe it'll even be my own. I'm not ruling it out. ☒

EIGHTEEN BRIDGES

Stories That Connect



Congratulations to our authors and creators for their sterling work in 2011, recognized at various awards ceremonies earlier this year. We at *Eighteen Bridges* are honoured to be publishing you, and we thank you for sharing your talent and vision.

2012 Alberta Magazine Publishers Association Awards

Category: Best Alberta Story

Finalist and **Winner** -- Omar Mouallem, "Cover Up" (EB2)

Finalist -- Chris Turner, "Bearing Witness" (EB3)

2012 Western Magazine Awards

Category: Arts, Culture and Entertainment

Finalist and **Winner** -- Don Gillmor, "All In" (EB2)

Finalist -- Tim Bowling, "On The Rails" (EB3)

Category: Environmental Writing

Finalist -- Chris Turner, "Bearing Witness" (EB3)

Category: Fiction

Finalist -- Greg Hollingshead, "The Drug-Friendly House" (EB3)

Finalist -- Romesh Gunesequera, "Hazard" (EB2)

Category: Human Experience

Finalist -- Jane Silcott, "Threshold" (EB3)

Category: Public Issues

Finalist -- Chris Turner, "Bearing Witness" (EB3)

Category: Science

Finalist: Russell Cobb, "Up in the Air" (EB3)

Category: Best Photo

Finalist -- Jessica Fern Facette, "Cover Up" (EB2)

Category: Best Article - Alberta/NWT

Finalist and **Winner** -- Chris Turner, "Bearing Witness" (EB3)

Finalist -- Omar Mouallem, "Under the Veil" (EB2)

Finalist -- Tim Bowling, "On The Rails" (EB3)

Category: Best New Magazine

Finalist and **Winner**: Eighteen Bridges Magazine

Category: Best Alberta Magazine

Finalist and **Winner**: Eighteen Bridges Magazine

Category: Western Magazine of the Year

Finalist: Eighteen Bridges Magazine

2012 National Magazine Awards

Category: Arts & Entertainment

Finalist and **Gold Medal Winner** -- Don Gillmor, "All In" (EB2)

Category: Travel

Finalist and **Silver Medal Winner** -- Alissa York, "Class Mammalia" (EB2)

Category: Essays

Finalist -- Tim Bowling, "On the Rails" (EB3)

Finalist -- Chris Turner, "Bearing Witness"

Category: Fiction

Finalist -- Greg Hollingshead, "The Drug-Friendly House" (EB3)

Category: Humour

Finalist -- Caroline Adderson, "How I Lost the War Against War And Learned to Love Arnold Schwarzenegger" (EB2)

Category: Personal Journalism

Finalist -- Russell Cobb, "Up in the Air" (EB3)

Finalist -- Don Gillmor, "All In" (EB2)

Finalist -- Jane Silcott, "Threshold" (EB3)

Category: Society

Finalist -- Omar Mouallem, "Under the Veil" (EB2)

For a list of retailers who stock *Eighteen Bridges*, or to subscribe, visit
www.eighteenbridges.com