

Shared Anniversary

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With apologies to my children, I can confidently say that my wedding day was the happiest day of my life, a goal I mocked when wedding vendors used it to try to win our business.

“I know you want this to be the most special, the most perfect day—”

“No.” I would interrupt the well-meaning catering contestant. “If this is the most perfect day, does that mean it’s all downhill after this?”

Before she began her confused apologies, I soothed her: “It doesn’t have to be perfect. I just need to wind up married to Sacha.”

But in fact, it was a glorious, scorching day on the banks of the Hudson River (nine years before Chelsea Clinton had the same idea). Except for one friend, our cohort was still childless and thus full of energy, enthusiasm, spontaneity. My dad was alive and healthy. My mother, with authority vested in her by the state of New York, married us with unsurpassed art and wisdom. We danced our butts off. And, icing on the cake, a friend confided that her chronically ill mother was up for a heart transplant that could put an end to her troubles and give her another thirty years on this earth. We all still moved about in a bubble of innocence we became aware of only after it popped.

No one who was there forgets our anniversary. It turned out to be a good-bye party to the way the world was.

Less than forty-eight hours later, we were atop a ridge in the Shawangunk Mountains when a pair of tourists told us two planes had hit the World Trade Center. I actually didn’t believe them, took

them for a pair of morons. A few hours later, when we finally got through to New York City, a remote reality began to dawn as my father reassured me that my mother was alive and walking uptown from her office. Another friend left a message that he'd begun a phone chain to account for our wedding guests, many of whom were scheduled to be on flights home to California or Boston that morning. That was day two of our marriage.

On September 12, we were supposed to head home to start the rest of our lives, but all of Manhattan was in lockdown. Instead, we drove to my in-laws, who lived upstate, not far from our honeymoon hotel. During breaks from the news, we opened the wedding presents we'd had shipped there instead of to our small apartment. I've tried to understand how I was able to take some pleasure in excavating new wineglasses and linen place mats and even a melon baller from the folds of Crate & Barrel tissue paper. I'd glance up at the screen, watch my native city burn, then snip open another box. Denial? Shock? A desire for tangible evidence that our married life was beginning—gleaming, unchipped, unstained—regardless of what the world threw at us?

Two of Sacha's relatives were also staying at his parents' house, stranded after the wedding, unable to get flights home to points west. One of them was so anxious she could barely speak to us; she'd worked up the courage to leave an ailing husband in order to attend our celebration, only to be punished for her generosity. She spent most of her time on the phone making sure he had enough to eat, that he was warm enough, that he hadn't fallen. At one point she answered call waiting and handed the phone to Sacha. He listened to the new call, his face calm. It was only from the pauses that I sensed something—else—wrong.

He hung up and took me aside, his eyes bright. We'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop, to learn that someone we knew had been in the towers or unlucky enough to have been downtown.

“Alice died last night.”

Alice was not someone who was downtown. Alice was the mother of our friend, the friend

who'd reported that we might be looking at a new chapter for her mother. It was a coda of a fuck-you from the universe: hey, what's one more life today?

We didn't open any more presents after that. Two planes into two buildings had been surreal enough to permit a kind of compartmentalization. This grief was a knee to the chest, utterly perceivable, and would have shaded our honeymoon in any context. We held each other and wept.

That was day three of our marriage.

On day four, a national guardsman rested one hand on a police barricade and the other on his rifle and regarded the dried-up bouquet I shook at him. His face revealed nothing. He wasn't going anywhere. His job that day was to start with no, and then let people prove their cases, like a script reader in Hollywood. The line behind my husband-of-ninety-six hours and me was growing longer, literally by the second. I started to dig through our suitcase. I began to babble.

"I swear to you, he's been living here for months. But he was finishing grad school and moving in and planning the wedding, and also, we went to Hawaii before the wedding because he had this conference there, so he hasn't had time to change his license. That's why this was a short honeymoon. We were even supposed to be back yesterday, but we couldn't get home. We couldn't get home."

With all the tragedy flaming around us after the planes hit the towers, this was the part that, selfishly, upset me the most at that moment. I count my blessings every day, and one of them is a variation on "I'm grateful I don't live in a country where tanks roll down Fifth Avenue." For the first time in my privileged life, I was getting a taste of freedom curtailed: we were required to show identification to reach our West Thirteenth Street apartment, which was still cordoned off as part of the dead zone. I had lived in that building since I was eight years old, but Sacha didn't have a shred of evidence to prove that this was now his one and only home.

"Here!" I shouted. "Look." I waved a newspaper clipping at him with the hand not clutching dead flowers. "Our wedding announcement. See?"

The phlegmatic officer either took pity on me or got tired of our holding up the line. He stepped back and let us squeeze through the splintery blue barricade. It wasn't the threshold I'd imagined crossing.

In theory, the first year of a modern marriage between offspring of liberal-minded families shouldn't be much more than a ceremonial transition, an uneventful twelve months preceded by cohabitation and followed sometime later by births, illnesses, and deaths. Compared to those rocky events, why should the procurement of a piece of paper with a seal on it shift the ground beneath you? How could signing a license be as momentous as the day Sacha moved in, a day that a man untroubled by accumulation threw his lot in with a sworn purger? And certainly, uttering vows under a pretty white tent wasn't more upending than what has followed: children born, parents getting sick, parents dying, mortgages (both approved and denied), renovations, uprootedness, often all together at the same time.

Why, even, should the officialization have been more momentous than the engagement, the moment at which we truly committed to spending our lives together? The wedding was just the party celebrating the decision we'd already made.

And yet.

Think about marriages that end, or begin to end, before the first anniversary. There has to be something about the vow taking that sheds light on problems that couldn't be seen or articulated before the ceremony (not unlike hitting send on a sensitive e-mail; the action suddenly highlights every flaw you couldn't see before). Certainly, many of us have teetered on the edge of marrying the wrong person. Years ago, when a six-year relationship of mine ended, my mother, though comforting and sympathetic, expressed relief that we didn't have to get married to get divorced. I don't tend to give much blanket advice, but this I know is true: if you get to a point where you say, "We need to either marry or break up," then please, please do everyone a favor and break up. A marriage should be a progression forward, not the result of a coin toss at a T-stop that led you

left instead of right.

Those who follow the coin-toss route probably suffer from a larger problem of false expectations: whatever's wrong with the relationship will be fixed by the Magic of Marriage, a sweet but misguided hope that there's a powerful tool available for purchase upon the tossing of the bouquet. These people must believe that getting married is like gaining entry to a secret club that will reveal heretofore unobtainable knowledge. They discover during the first year that this is not the case.

And under the harsh light of tragedy—death, illness, terrorist attack—perhaps that discovery is made during the first month. For better or worse, misfortune throws into sharp relief the contours of a nascent marriage. So if one member of the couple has to leave the country immediately following the wedding, it's a little tough to gauge how the marriage is doing in the face of said misfortune.

Three weeks after our wedding, Sacha, a professional entomologist, began a two-month stint in the Bolivian jungle capturing dung beetles. As a grad student, he'd traveled to Bolivia many times during our courtship and I was familiar with the totality of his absence: no Internet access, no phone calls. He would land in Santa Cruz, load up on eight weeks' worth of rice for him and his fieldhands, find a working car, and take a perilous, bumpy, dusty two-day drive away from civilization, during which the car was sure to break down at least twice. (Doing science in developing countries requires an aptitude for auto mechanics.) To communicate with him, I e-mailed his coworker's wife, who then drove to a museum in Santa Cruz once a week to radio our husbands. She'd return home and e-mail me with Sacha's response.

A week after Sacha left, the United States began bombing Afghanistan. If I'd found our meager

communication wanting in the past, I was finding it downright unbearable this time around. Sirens continued to roar past our apartment day and night, smoke billowed up in a column from the bottom of Sixth Avenue like a giant, wavering tombstone, and the neighborhood was swimming in what would turn out to be utterly futile missing-person flyers.

With hindsight, we can all sum up our experiences of that time succinctly, dinner-party style, but while it was going on, every day, sometimes every hour, seemed to bring a new perspective. Add to that constantly shifting outlook a brand-new identifying trait—married—and an absent brand-new husband who wasn't even a phone call away and you have a woman who went and stuck her head in the sand: I spent day after day in the café across the street from our apartment, a million miles away, writing my first screenplay. It was a romance set in pre-9/11 New York City that allowed me, for five or six hours a day, to escape. Better than reading, I had the power to create exactly, detail for detail, the world I longed to return to.

When I reluctantly emerged from my fictional fog at the end of each day, all I had for comfort was the new ring on my finger. Had our marriage been anchored on flimsy foundations, I might have worried that this tumultuous time apart would drive a wedge between us. Instead, I imagined my ring as one end of a steel (okay, platinum) line connecting me to Sacha, a bond I could display to anyone in our quickly disintegrating world and say, "That man out there? Mine. Thousands of miles and languages and currencies and topographies away, but he's mine. I have official proof that is recognized on every inch of this planet." I'd always been an advocate of same-sex marriage, but now I felt in my gut what it meant to have that piece of paper in hand, and how it would be nothing short of a nightmare to be denied one. There are times, especially in the uncharted waters of early marriage, when that paper is all you have.

Sacha returned safely from that trip and we finally got started on married life under the same roof. He began working at his new job, I finished my screenplay, we stopped wearing contact lenses, because the grit that drifted up to us from Ground Zero meant constant eye irritation. We went out, we ordered in, we held up thank-you signs on the West Side Highway to flash at the endless caravan of construction vehicles. We read books, we went to movies, we wondered whether New York City had a future.

A bond that began to form during wedding planning strengthened during these months. To survive caterers, florists, and even our wonderful parents, Sacha and I had developed a mantra: Us Against The World. I know this sounds like an antagonistic way to go about the sugary business of nuptials and life in general, especially when you consider that our parents are among our favorite people in the world—a reasonable, lovely quartet who shared the same ethics and aesthetics with each other and us. But even reasonable, lovely people will sometimes focus on details you do not care about, like, say, the menu, or the color of the flowers, or the quality of the hotels in which they are going to house their relatives.

Letting us form a new bond, sometimes against them, was the greatest gift they gave us—graciously conceding their spots to the upstart newcomer marrying their precious child—and one that was indispensable during that first year as husband and wife, when our world was unnavigable. Part of early marriage is learning to put someone ahead of your parents, as painful and unsettling as that may be for those of us who come from tight, happy families. (It's anyone's guess whether I'll manage to be half as merciful to the people my children marry. I practice acceptance now, while they are three and six, to get a running start.) We began to see ourselves as one entity before the wedding; the tragedy that surrounded us during our first year cemented that perception.

Seven months into marriage, Sacha traveled again, only this time it was to lecture on a cruise up the Orinoco and I got to go with him. Instead of bags of rice, there was a chef on board reported

to have been snatched up from a three-star hotel in Paris and there were seven kinds of cake at dinner every night. Seven. I'm not exaggerating and my memory has not dimmed (someday scientists will discover a lobe of the brain charged entirely with remembering significant meals). We set sail on a large yacht with seventy passengers who had paid to see the wonders of South America during the day and be enlightened by my husband and his PowerPoint show at night.

One evening aboard the ship, the schedule of events was reversed. After dinner, everyone gathered in the lecture room to learn what we might see on our night excursion into the tributaries of the river. We were to explore the moonless, riparian wilds in Zodiacs. Zodiacs sound like they should be impenetrable and, to my mind, metal modes of transport, but in fact they are inflatable dinghies with motors. Inflatable. Did I mention inflatable? The seats were precarious perches along the edges of the craft. We held flashlights and headlamps. Everyone else looked for crocodiles. I looked *out* for crocodiles.

I am not as brave as Sacha. Sure, I went the drug-free route with childbirth, but tolerating pain, when you know that you are not in danger of irreparable physical harm, is very different from putting yourself in a situation with unreasonable creatures, where the jungle equivalent of an episiotomy is not in the offing. Most ecologists are lured to their profession, in part, by the inherent adventure. Take Sacha's boss, for instance, who was with us in the Zodiac. She leaned out over the boat and wrestled something in the water. It came up flailing and splashing in the dark.

"Oh, it's a baby," she cooed.

Baby crocodile.

She clamped one hand over its mouth so that we could touch its writhing body. Everyone else in the boat eagerly leaned in to stroke the wet scales, while I screwed up my courage. Since having children, especially a daughter, I have forced myself to overcome instinctive wimpiness in these situations and do the required touching of befanged wild creatures. I didn't yet have to be a role model that night in the Zodiac, but I did have a choice to make: reveal my fear to my brand-

new husband or attempt to overcome it for his sake. Why? To show him my intention to rise, over the course of our marriage, to his level of adventurousness, and not sink him to my level of overcaution. To reassure him that just because I had the ring, I wasn't going to suddenly strand him with an unadventurous mate. And yet there was something about the ring that made me less concerned with what he'd think of the result of my test of courage. Reader, I failed to coddle the crocodile.

If the first year of marriage is about realigned loyalties, it is also about the blinders that necessarily come off as you gaze eye to eye at your new Numero Uno. Sacha and I have talked openly—though not too frequently—about our disappointments in each other, there being one significant trait (and any number of small peeves) in the other that we wish was more or less pronounced, or something we'd envisioned ourselves doing more or less of because of the influence of our future partner. For him, it is a longing for a mate who would get him backpacking, camping, and rock climbing more than naturally occurs to me to do. (Tough luck for him; I found this great guy who does that for me.) In that first year, coming to terms with the reality we'd committed to—versus the ideals we'd conjured when we were younger—must have been scary for Sacha. For me, the unease was outweighed by the comfort of commitment; there is something to be said for the reassuring heft of a ball and chain.

Ten years ago, like New York City itself, my new husband and I had no way of knowing how we would weather the world events in our backyard. But in just one decade of marriage, we have partaken in better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health, stasis and change, much of it sampled during that first year. Would our legal union have been different had we not begun it alongside tragedy? The answer may lie in the kind of tragedy: if we'd suffered a personal loss, 9/11 might have tripped us up or slowed us down. But while the horror left me with sweat-soaked nightmares of flaming buildings and unbounded anxiety for the future of our city, the fact remained that we were some of the lucky ones. The people we loved were safe.

So even though we were welcomed home with weapons and weeping, even though we couldn't huddle together in the immediate aftermath, and even though I have to think twice to remember the actual, overshadowed date of our anniversary, 9/11 did not harm our first twelve months. It turned out to be a catalyst, speeding up the best and hardest transformations, driving Sacha and me together with brute force, and forging, yes, I'll risk putting this in print, an indestructible bond.

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