

There's Always Divorce and other Parental Advice

By Sally Koslow

My sons have put a ring on it. They are getting married. For months, the conversational axis in our households has tilted on diamond versus sapphire, tuxedo versus dark suit, and Costa Rico versus Jackson Hole, since the venue of Venus is booked. Not that my boys hold my opinions in especially high regard. As the mother of grooms, my primary function has been to stifle myself, ruminate on the true meaning of mother-in-law-hood and write checks. After the Jurassic Bar Mitzvah era, my husband and I thought our major fiduciary responsibility for bash-throwing was over, but—who knew?—today the groom's family goes halves on many expenses, and there are many.

From what I can tell, Jed and Rory have chosen their life partners well. I have grown attached to these almost-daughters and after playing house, I'm glad they're going legal. Living together is fine—I did it myself—but one nasty fight and a call to Moishe's Movers later, both Anne and Kim could be out of my life.

For wedding #1 I bought a strapless column of Dolce & Gabanna satin so sleek and corseted I don't plan to eat as much as a scoop of ice cream for the next three months. For wedding #2, I hope to wear a dreamy velvet frock I pounced on at my one and only Chanel sample sale, justifying the purchase with that eternal salvo, "I'll wear it someday." Someday is around the corner, a son taking a wife. This brings me back--to that time before both boys sprouted wit and whiskers, before they arrived at all, to those starter years when my husband and I were twenty-three, younger than my kids are now, just married, and calling a bagel dinner so we could nap, then leave for Studio 54.

At twenty-three some people are old oaks. They've fought wars, supported families, become parents, faced disasters or at the very least skipped high school because they were too smart for their own good. At that age Rob and I were not quite smart enough to get out of our own way. Our vision of married life was fuzzy. We were an unlikely

couple: East Coast boy/Midwest girl, Hellmann's Mayo/Miracle Whip, outgoing/shy, athletic/not. We bickered. We competed. We were *young*.

Rob and I were standard issue early-1970s types, though cut of different cloth. He was charming yet caustic, a suburban hippie with eyes the color of grass, the kind you mow, not the sort we smoked at college where we'd dated for two years. Rob majored in French, a romantic yet useless choice unless you hoped to teach the language or work where it is spoken. He planned to do neither. He hadn't planned at all. After graduation Rob returned to his parents' home near New York City and drove a cab. Every Sunday he made deliveries for a bakery, so the pint-sized freezer in the kitchenette through which you squeezed into my similarly-sized apartment was always stuffed with jaw-breaking rugelach he received as a tip.

I was conventional yet career-oriented, a girl who'd moved from Fargo to Manhattan with a degree in English and her earnestness so intact that when Rob once suggested lunch at McDonald's because it was my "kind of place;" I wept at the insult. He liked golf tournaments. I, Masterpiece Theater. I couldn't understand what was funny about Woody Allen and he felt the same way about the news from Lake Woebegone.

Soon after I arrived in New York an Alberta Clipper blew in from my mother, trumpeting the message *get the guy to marry you or move on*. I'm not a lot of things but I am determined and took this direction to heart. Moving on was unthinkable. Rob was more than my love. He'd become my roommate, my only close friend within fifteen-hundred miles, and my Seeing Eye dog in a city of blinding confusion. I'd landed an editing job—back at college in Madison, Wisconsin, when not ducking the National Guard as they tear-gassed Vietnam War protestors I, with shame for my bourgeois ambition, had mailed resumes—but the fancy-pants atmosphere of the magazine where I worked scared the confidence right off me. Every night, Rob restored it, and even though both of us were embryonic, something told me he was the one. I'm not sure why he stuck with me; we weren't caught in a maelstrom of nuptials. I suspect Rob believed that one day I would

simply disappear, not turn to him every morning and ask, as I did, “Is this the day we’re getting engaged?”

Had a woman ever tried this on one of my sons she would have found me stalking her, assault weapon in hand. Forget *The Rules*. My approach was the kind of niggling, tone-deaf assault that ultimately can wear a man down. One evening as Rob and I drove to his parents’ home, we pulled to the side of the road and he popped open a small velvet box that contained a sparkling rock. I don’t recall if he actually asked me to marry him but the next stop involved toasting with champagne. I later learned that the family had anticipated an epic engagement during which I imagine they hoped their son might, say, graduate from law school. But all of these people—and I add my name to the list—had underestimated my mother, a woman who knew how to seal a deal.

Nowadays a bride and groom become their own ecosystem. Decades ago, it was the mother of the bride’s Woodstock. The bride chose her dress, a color scheme and with her fiancé’s input—assuming he was interested, which Rob was not-- china and silver patterns. The groom showed up, hangover optional. My mother selected our wedding date and virtually everything else. Not once did Rob and I meet with a florist, a stationer, a caterer, a band leader. This gave us ample time to wonder, have we gotten in to? Three months after the wedding-train had left the station I bared my cold feet to my father. Never one to confront my mother, his response was, “There’s always divorce.”

Rob and I were married on December 26 in North Dakota. The temperature never broke zero. Rob’s family tells tales about how tears formed icicles on their eyelashes, how the hearty locals plugged cars into warming contraptions before they drove, and how while the New York guests bundled in full-length mink, bikini-clad Canadian tourists cavorted around the Holiday Inn pool as if they were catching rays in Barbados.

On Christmas we got a special gift from the rabbi, whose wife had just dumped him. At a command performance counseling session he ranted about how most marriages crash over sex or money. Or both! At the rehearsal an hour later, my future mother-in-law

became incensed when the same rabbi forbids the exclamation point that had ended every other Jewish wedding for 5732 years: the groom breaking a glass. I never fully understood the rabbi's beef, because I stopped listening after "hymen" and the shade that word turned my father's face. Rob developed a fever which spiked during the wedding ceremony. At the reception, a drunken couple danced to our song before we did. We did have a high old time on the trip back east, however, when a blizzard grounded our plane, and a Minneapolis hotel put us up in their honeymoon suite. The detour didn't delay our real honeymoon because we hadn't planned one. We simply returned to our messy little dive and matching life.

None of this was an auspicious start to marriage and it didn't get better we were robbed in our brownstone's vestibule. My new husband handed over his wallet. I'd had just cashed my dainty fashion magazine paycheck and peeled off two tens. "Give the guy all your f-ing money!" Robert yelled. "He's pointing a knife at my back." Reluctantly, I complied.

I decided that we needed a doorman. Back in the day, apartments were easy to come by in our neighborhood, where sensible people wouldn't park their cars, much less themselves. After looking for an hour with a broker, I announced to Rob that we were moving. The same day we signed a lease in a grand dowager building. Our apartment, which you entered through a genuine foyer, had a vast living room and cozy dining room, enormous closets, high ceilings, herringbone parquet, bookshelves, arches, a bike room with a vending machine that sold milk, a laundry in the basement instead of blocks away and a leafy view of Riverside Park. Recently this apartment was listed for sale \$1.3 million, but when we were newlyweds it cost \$285 a month to rent.

When we changed addresses we not only brought along our bad habits, we seemed to adopt the other person's most odious traits. Rob learned to be relentless and I, to be sarcastic. I also threw things. One evening, in response to a flying phonebook, he tossed all my clothes in the hall and locked me out in my underwear. Good times.

And then he got mugged. Rob had segued from taxi hack to construction worker to real estate manager in the dodgiest part of the Bronx, where he was cornered in a boiler room, beaten by a junkie with a pipe, shot and left for dead. His boss called my office and told me to go home and wait for further information. Why I didn't rush straight to the ER I can explain only by saying I was so stunned I felt as if I, too, had been conked on the head. I was also 23 going on 13, doing whatever real adults instructed. A few hours later, to my immense relief, a bandage-swaddled Rob staggered into our apartment, his thrift shop army jacket splattered with blood. The next night we threw a party for all our friends where Rob repeated his war story on a continuous loop

Perhaps the beating was divine intervention, mugging some sense into us. We rarely discussed it, but the incident was an elephant of a testimonial that whispered "grow up." Incrementally, we did. The process began by making a home. We stapled plaid sheets to our bedroom walls, had draperies sewn by an elf in a yarmulke on the Lower East Side and ordered pinkalicious shag carpeting. The room looked very Pepto Bismol meets Cinderella. Unaware that a product existed that stripped finish in minutes, Rob and I spent night after sweaty night sanding our cupboard doors, which we repainted egg yolk yellow. We hung calico curtains, unpacked wedding presents and began to host dinner parties on our twelve place-settings of Wedgwood Florentine and Gorham Buttercup sterling flatware. One night we threw an ear-splitting disco party and served fried chicken in straw baskets lined with red bandanas. We were a colorful couple, doing what happy couples did. When our first anniversary rolled around, we celebrated at La Bibliothèque, a restaurant tricked out like a library. Seeing Rob through the candlelight, I realized I no longer felt spooked or tempted by my dad's term of endearment, "there's always divorce." We'd made it through the first year. Life could only get better and it did.

Over the years, we have befriended many couples. Half of them have divorced, many of our friends are on round two or three of marriage and several of my best buddies are single. Meanwhile, Rob and I are chugging along, the little engine that never surrendered. My husband doesn't look much different to me than he did in college, but inexplicably, soon we will celebrate our fortieth anniversary, on which I believe you're expected to

exchange gift certificates to orthopedists and cosmetic surgeons. We are happy, very happy. In no way, however, do we define the charmed life.

During the decades we've faced down the standard grab-bag of health problems, deaths of parents, work setbacks and--damn you, Rabbi—intermittent financial frustration. If you ask Rob, he'll say I still don't know how much milk to pour into his cereal and yes, once I voted for Rudolph Giuliani. We aren't one of those couples who have hammered out a mission statement that ensures that we present ourselves like matched draft animals. We're nobody's role model, but I'm skeptical of public role models. Whenever I see couples behaving on cult-like autopilot, always in character—"You tell the story, pooh bear!" "No, baby, *you!*"—what I think they reveal is their measure of devotion to self-control and branding, not necessarily one another. We are a different kind of team, still making it up as we go along, pissing each other off, and sometimes acting bossy, critical and small. But lubricating every childish act is laughter, which at least sixty-five percent of the time is not at the other's expense.

After this lifetime together, we share a common history, which is not small at all. Our story is filled with anecdotes, digressions and footnotes that are goofy, tender, terrifying and ours. How when we roasted our first turkey we chose a recipe that called for a crab apple jelly glaze and had to use a hammer to crack the bird's shellac. (Never again have we served poultry as moist or as purple.) How numerous cigar-puffing uncles and fifty other near and dear ones crowded into our apartment and made seven pounds of Zabar's finest Nova Scotia salmon disappear in five minutes at the bacchanalia that was our oldest son Jed's *bris*. How after we drove my mother to the airport the next day we sang "Happy Days are Here Again." They were. We had become a family. (Correction: a family and a nurse. In today's dollars, she would probably also cost \$1.3 million.)

Some of our chapters are dull, others painful. We are awash in memories we can lip synch, including some Rob and I could and would never explain to anyone. But this archive welds us, friends and lovers who've grown up together. Whenever I look at Rob, I see the boy in the man. Dammit, I love the guy.

That Jed and Rory are getting married is, for their generation, almost quaint; statistics point to cohabitation, not marriage. Recently when one of their new friends discovered that *both* Rob and I were the parents, still married to one another, the shock on this kid's face made me feel as if we had stumbled out of a diorama at the Museum of National History. Has our endurance made our boys more willing than many of their friends to go over the cliff to marriage? All I know is that we haven't scared them off.

Jed and Rory strike me as infinitely more prepared for matrimony than Rob and I were, though in fairness, they're older: 34 and 28. They treat their fiancées with enormous consideration and respect, as they are treated in return. Teasing is gentle and infrequent. They make plans, many plans. Perhaps we should take lessons from them, not offer advice. But as a mother advice-giving is part of my job description, and so:

Think beyond the wedding to the life you want to build together. No one will remember if the groom wore a dark suit or a tuxedo.

Don't measure yourself against the next couple. Be skeptical of others' perfection.

Do everything you can to make sure your husbands and wives love your parents.

Keep laughing.

Put those dirty boxers in the hamper.

Ladies, learn to roast a chicken.

Never think "there's always divorce."

Call your parents. We finally know a thing or two.