

with a careless driving mistake, and the ensuing argument killed any shred of interest I still had in the relationship.

I wanted to know an all-consuming passion. I wanted to be with someone who was lawless and forceful yet embodied principles of justice. He wanted a true and romantic love, a reflection of his own best self, a partner and friend. Somehow, in our impetuous rush toward adulthood, we found that our mutual admiration was not enough to make a marriage. We could not figure out how to give in to another person before the effacement of self became an effacement of the point of being together. I can break out the details and say that I was raised to be an independent woman, and he was raised to be a patriarchal man, but that would be false and also too easy, because it exempts us both from blame. The truth is that we were too young and too stubborn. We could not handle the mundane obligations of married life, of a world where rules were necessary and advantageous. Real adults are not outlaws, and good parents must be adults.

I was offered a place at graduate school, and he was notified of a transfer to Louisiana. My first and only response was to make the right choice for myself, which meant staying in school. His essential, implacable anger caused him to break out in hives whenever he talked to me. He hated me because I had the freedom to go to school, because I would not follow him, because I disregarded his opinions on every critical life decision. I simply did not care. We were no longer exquisitely strange; we were just normal and stressed and trying hard to grow up, with a child of our own to raise. We had a final, brutal, disastrous argument. The marriage was over, and our parents came to sort and pack. He kept the ironing board, a few books and the Hunter S. Thompson poster. I took the household goods, all my letters, the child.

My Best Friend's Not Coming to My Wedding

Jennifer Maher

We are standing in the stairwell of the English department hallway. The walls are institutional orange, a color recently hip again. As Astrid is on her way down the stairs to receive an academic award, I pick the worst of times to break the news. I do this because I am afraid that in the few minutes before the awards ceremony someone will pull her aside and refer to it casually, in end-of-semester banter. After all, many people will be at this celebration, as there always are when you combine graduate students with free booze and food.

"I have to tell you something," I say, panic rising in my throat like a wave full of jellyfish tentacles.

"What?" she says, picking up on my nervousness and setting her jaw tighter.

"Gareth and I are getting married this August." I do my best to smile, because after all, this is good news. At the same time, I know how Astrid feels about marriage, and also that many of her political beliefs about it as an institution are dead-on. So I try not to smile too much. I don't want her to think of me as one of those women with a fat issue of *Bride's* under one arm and a gleaming layaway mall diamond on my finger. However, I know that if I do

not smile enough, act appropriately happy and excited, I will be subject to even more intense questioning about my motivations. I will be asked over and over again if this is something I really want to do, or if it is an unconscious attempt to control my future when so much—the dearth of academic jobs, the uncertain future of ad-hoc college lecturing—is out of my control. I want her to be happy, but I know she will not. She will be angry, and I will act surprised and even angrier back. Astrid is one of my closest friends, yet right now I feel as if I'm driving a borrowed car: Though I know how it works, the seat is too far forward and I'm not sure how to turn on the headlights. In order not to crash, I must pay close attention to everything I do. I think all this in a few (nervous) seconds.

"I *knew* you were going to do this," she says, as if she finally caught me trying to pocket her favorite M.A.C. lipstick, or as if I had broken her heart for good this time, which I suppose in a way I had.

Astrid's reaction, though she might argue with this interpretation, is based on equal parts politics and emotions. A real sadness arises when you formally declare your decision to make one person (especially a person of the opposite sex) your chief life partner. I sometimes think "forsaking all others" has more to do with your female friends than it does sexual fidelity. For women, at least, marriage signifies (among other things) an end to careless girlhood. Right or wrong, in this culture marriage communicates maturity, a giving up of lighthearted youth in order to hunker down and take the next step, one that involves mortgages and sleeping in your own bed before midnight on weekends. As is the case with many cultural myths, this isn't necessarily true. My marriage, for instance, includes the unstated provisos that I will still attend the band performances of friends and that, as a part-time bartender, I will be out later than midnight at least two nights a week. This has caused people to remark, sometimes in awe, sometimes just in surprise, "You don't act like you're married." Mind you, I don't spend these evenings making out with strangers or dancing on tabletops—it is purely that I am out telling stories with a cocktail in one hand and no husband holding the other. Gareth is similarly taken aback when people act surprised that I go out at night on my own (he has a far lower tolerance for indie rock than I do). Questions are asked, often including words like "allow," as

if "spouse" were a synonym for "Dad" and getting married meant you lose all desire to do anything other than stay home and read candles from the Pottery Barn catalog. Thus, my husband and I both conform and do not conform to the marriage = maturity proviso. I have no mortgage payment (as recent humanities PhDs, we have little money), and though we sleep in the same bed every night, from time to time I am crawling into it in the wee hours and waking him up because I smell of smoke.

At the same time, though, it would be insincere to suggest that others' expectations of what marriage means have nothing whatsoever to do with how we perceive our relationship. An actual giving up of personal freedom comes when you claim couplehood so officially. Though I think this is the case in any committed monogamous relationship, being married seems to signify something stronger to third parties who you don't know very well, like acquaintances and extended-family members. When I went out alone before I was married, people flirted with me much more, though I feel the same about my husband now as before we exchanged vows. Suddenly, it's as if I were surrounded by an emotional invisible electric fence, one activated by the ring around my finger.

This assumed distance from people other than the spouse is even built into a father's traditional disingenuous wedding toast: "I am not losing a daughter, I am gaining a son-in-law." But, as the polite laughter indicates, no one actually believes it. It is a culturally agreed upon cover-up along the lines of the high school graduation caveat/cliché that commencement is not an end, it is a beginning. Sure and bullshit all at once. Let's face it, graduation is the end of believing that you can be a famous journalist and a pop star in the same lifetime. It's the end of getting stoned with your best friend in a clean and quiet house at three-thirty in the afternoon, a house where all the food in the refrigerator is paid for (and not by you). Similarly, after you are married, you will never lie so comfortably again on your single bed secretly smoking cigarettes and waiting for your laundry or a phone message. You will no longer automatically give your parents' address on forms that ask for emergency contact information. You can't take home the lovely boy in the black sweater who's been eyeing you all night. You can't decide to drive with your friends to Chicago at 11:30 p.m. because someone else is going to

be wondering where you are. When you get good news, or when you feel so bad even expensive lipstick doesn't help, you will most likely turn to him, not to one of your "pussy posse."

It's not that losing these things is all bad—I mean, who wants to sleep in a single bed forever? And remember how much you actually *wanted* to leave high school? The guy in the black sweater might very well be a lousy lay, and a psycho besides. So goes the sweet loss, the choice that makes other choices unmakeable. Marriage-inspired monogamy is a kind of synecdoche for the whole end of possibility that marriage ushers in. I wouldn't want it any other way, but it's tough to face the facts head-on. Never sleeping with anyone else for the rest of my life seems hard to believe, but when I lie next to Gareth on our lumpy futon and he pulls me closer to him like I am the most interesting book he could ever wish to read in his sleep, I could believe anything. Whenever you choose to spend the bulk of your time and energy with one person, you are to some extent closing yourself off to that intensity with others. I believe this to be a valuable path to a deeper self-understanding. But where does it leave your friends?

Marriage, for all its celebration of love, is also about broken hearts. I know, I know, we are all told that marriage is about a bringing together, a mingling of hearts and families. While this is true, it leaves out what such a step signals for friendship, especially female friendship. Long the subject of feminist analysis, female friendship is of central importance to any understanding and/or change young women might bring to the institutions of marriage and feminism. Indeed, I found the reaction of three of my closest friends to my impending marriage—Astrid and my two former roommates, Anna and Sarah—to mirror current feminist debates about the meaning of marriage, couplehood and friendship. While Astrid's tone was one of chagrin and anger, Anna and Sarah wholeheartedly supported whatever I wanted to do. They teared up at the thought of this imposition into our threesome, but they decided at the outset to be there for me in whatever capacity I needed.

But first, an introduction. When I moved to Milwaukee from Los Angeles for graduate school in 1991, I had no idea that America's Dairyland would provide the kind of experiences I had only dreamed

about in my terribly geeky teenage years in California's San Fernando Valley. I spent my adolescent years compulsively watching MTV, spraying my hair with Aqua Net and planning what poem I would quote when I met Sting. Being two thousand miles from home and in a community where you can meet most of the interesting people within a few months allowed me to reinvent myself. I met Anna and Sarah—best friends who looked like the coolest girls at every gathering—fairly quickly and was immediately besotted. On the afternoon I finally sat down in their big pink kitchen, drinking lemonade spiked with cheap beer and sprigs of mint, with Liz Phair playing on the crummy boom box in the corner, I knew I was home.

I couldn't believe my luck to have met these fantastic, beautiful girl-artists who dressed extravagantly, cooked four-course dinners on a whim and listened to Leonard Cohen (even the new stuff!). They had won a dance marathon at eighteen and gone to Jamaica on the prize money. Once Sarah got so angry that she poured orange paint all over Anna's bed. Anna was locally famous for making silver headless-mermaid jewelry and for hand-painting designs on her tights. One night when I was particularly anxious about something so meaningless I can't even remember it, the girls distracted me by sneaking us through the backyards of the lakefront mansions to go swimming in our clothes. All this glamour and fun was mine for the taking, and with a few adjustments in my old-fashioned need for a full night's sleep and the Valley Girl conviction that shoes and purses should match, I was living a life I thought existed only in mid-eighties Bananarama videos. Anna and Sarah had been a support system for each other for more than five years. When I joined them, they became my second family. They offered a wonderful chick-positive environment, where—though we were all boy-crazy—our alliances were first and foremost with each other. Their house was, no doubt about it, Girl Central. I soon moved in.

I remember awakening from one of those three-hour midweek naps in which only students, the ill and the unemployed can indulge. As always, I awoke startled, with my heart pounding: Am I late for a class? Is something due? What day of the week is it? Where am I supposed to be? Soft laughter and the sounds of Joan Armatrading entered my consciousness as I kicked open my door a crack to see Anna and Sarah treating

the wood floor in the kitchen. The kitchen opened out onto a slanted roof garden covered in tarpaper and Astroturf, lined with sunflowers planted in toilets painted in psychedelic swirls of color. The sun was setting, and the light coming through the leaded glass kitchen window bounced off Anna's thrift-store collection of state souvenir pottery and the glass marbles on the windowsill. Though I would come to hate having this room (it's too near where everyone congregates drunk at parties), I felt a rush of thankfulness and pleasure so intense that it almost immediately made me sad. I call it pre-nostalgia.

Anna and Sarah constructed this house as a girly paradise. Almost every flat surface was painted. The house was huge, pink inside and out, and stretched long and wide. A former dance hall from the twenties, it had a sprung wood floor, elegantly curved walls and a living room accessible only by walking through the mint-green-tiled bathroom. Its attic was stuffed with vintage clothes and a ten-foot-tall table of elements from an abandoned warehouse downtown. The main living-room furniture was a large bed on an iron frame, covered with pillows. Common activities during my time there were spending hours dressing up to go out (always the most fun part of the evening); spending an entire afternoon ripping up magazines to make a mix-tape cover for a new crush; and taking part in elaborate ceremonies like the funeral we held for the house's blue Japanese fighting fish, who finally had given up his lonely life after one too many ash-strewn parties. It was 1993, the height of Northwest grunge, but it might as well have been the Jazz Age to me.

The pink house was magical, no doubt about it, and adamantly girl-centered. But, although Anna and Sarah wouldn't hesitate to call themselves feminists, the house was not outwardly political. Rather, it was instead gender conscious. In "Fear of Feminism: Why Young Women Get the Willies" (*Ms.*, November/December 1994), Lisa Maria Hogeland defines gender consciousness as, among other things, "our self-awareness as women . . . an appreciation of things pertaining to women." She argues that feminism, on the other hand, politicizes gender consciousness, cutting through girl-power marketing strategies, and "inserts it into a systematic analysis of histories and structures of domination and privilege." Though the differences between gender consciousness and feminism proper are very subtle, and indeed, the two bleed into each

other, I can still say that the pink house vibe was more about female alliance than feminist analysis. Even though we spent more time with one another than with the men in our lives (which contributed to the end of one of my relationships), the feminist connection was implicit but not explicit: We all knew, for example, how much being judged by our appearance was wrong and patriarchal, but we still took pleasure in modeling outfit after outfit and raiding one another's makeup bins.

But Anna and Sarah and our Bananarama lifestyle made up only half of my identity. I was, and am, an academic, and my friendships outside the pink house were chiefly with other graduate students. My first meeting with Astrid embodied this collision of cultures. I was a few minutes late to the beginning-of-semester meet 'n' greet. I rushed in, breathless and carrying my belongings in a red, cinnamon-scented plastic bag, the only one I could find in the pink house that morning. I don't remember much about my first impression of the other students at the meeting, but I noticed Astrid right away. Befitting her name, she was very Danish-cool, with her long, thick blond hair pulled back, tasteful silver rings and oversize man's watch. My hair was curly at the time, and dyed a gorgeous shade of eggplant that unfortunately had faded into a pinkish, dry bird's nest of a mistake. I think I had to ask to borrow someone's pen. Later, Astrid told me that when I dashed in with that big bag and that hair she felt like she was in a scene from *Desperately Seeking Susan*. An enduring and often cantankerous friendship began.

No stranger to pink-house shenanigans herself, and a fan in many ways, Astrid pinpointed what would later become a pressing domestic dilemma. At one gathering there, she leaned in to me and, between giggles, said, "This place is so great. But how do you ever get any work done?" The feminist-studies work she was talking about, as alluded to earlier, had everything to do with our subsequent fights about my decision to marry. Anna and Sarah considered (as I do to a certain extent) deciding to marry (or not) an individual choice predicated on the freedom of individual choice that itself forms the basis for feminism. But the feminist belief system Astrid and I share would not let me off so easily; it instead demanded theoretical inquiry into the very notions of freedom, choice, politics and individuality. She would just as easily say something like, "So why do you think you're buying so many clothes you can't

afford this week?" as she'd say, "Nice jacket, is it new?"

I needed, and do need, both kinds of feminism—and both kinds of friends. Feminism allows me to say "fuck off" to patriarchal expectations of behavior and bearing, as well as to dress as I want (in spike heels or a wedding dress, or both). Feminism also prods me to analyze what it is about spike heels and wedding dresses I find so compelling, and where the cultural constructs undergirding my desire for such things come from. I can't just view feminism as offering me an out to do whatever I want without the accompanying analysis of the influences and pressures upon that want. It's exhausting, but I couldn't imagine it any other way.

Of course, these categories of playful girl-centric feminists versus those committed to rigorous analysis are to a large extent artificial. After all, it's not as if you can't wear platform shoes and fishnets while reading *Ms.* on the bus. In fact, I'm sure Astrid has. I am by no means trying to imply that as a feminist one has to be one or the other—although people often expect it. As with the surprise that people register with the way Gareth and I live—not acting appropriately "married" according to their conventional definitions of the term—so too could I be called out for not acting appropriately feminist, according to one limited definition. Getting married meant, depending whether you asked Astrid or Anna and Sarah, that I was either a "bad" feminist (apolitical, engaged in the worst elements of heterosexual privilege) or a "good" one (believing that feminism is above all the permission to make individual decisions apart from anyone's expectations of you to do otherwise). Rather than feeling like it was more complicated, and that I was being both good and bad in differing ways, choosing to get married made me feel as if I had to align with one side or another. Through my friendships, I saw these feminist conflicts in exaggerated relief.

However, my internal struggles with the pink house and feminism (in addition to my ideological wranglings with Astrid) started long before the marriage plans. Certainly, the house was perfect for me before I began writing my dissertation, when I was dragging myself to a bookstore job that started at 10 A.M., full of embarrassing memories and a killer hangover. It was heaven before prelim exams and independent study sessions, when I felt as inclined to build a kite on a Saturday

afternoon as to finish a paper. Sarah and Anna were not frivolous in any means; the discussions we had well into the night around the kitchen table were about loss, one's place in the world, the pain of family affairs, the fucked-upness of family. But we didn't spend much time delving into the connection between gender and politics, and I never felt like my serious academic side, the one that was writing papers about this very thing, was adequately recognized. Saying "I have to work on my essay today, so I can't go with you on the picnic where everyone will be dressed as Frida Kahlo and there will be a talent show" made me seem more like a spoilsport than the girl-power feminist (also) was. I was more inclined to get extra sleep so as to get some serious reading done the next day than to stay up 'til 3 A.M. making a surrealist film about the *Challenger* explosion.

I met Gareth at the time when my need to focus on academics over pink-house projects was intensifying. I don't profess to know anything about fate or if I even believe in it, so this confluence of emotional readiness and circumstance remains unexplained. I do know that I began hanging out with Gareth, a recent grad of my PhD program, because he was wickedly funny, sarcastic and smart. I liked how his shaved head, dark eyebrows and chlorine-blue eyes made him look like a cross between a science-fiction villain and a Wim Wenders angel. He is as much a fan of *SportsCenter* as of Zora Neale Hurston. He likes Bioré strip almost as much as I do. His favorite movie is *Reds*. His second-favorite is *Clueless*. How could I not fall in love? But while he liked and respected the Pinkies, he was very clearly a foreign element (literally, being from Wales). Quiet, shy and inclined to bursts of silly rhymes in his underwear only when alone with me, he struck Sarah and Anna as slightly cold, not at all spontaneous and fundamentally uninterested in film about space travel made in the wee hours.

It's not that Gareth and I didn't, or don't, have fun, but rather that we share a serious pleasure in intellectual inquiry and good writing. We get off on philosophical debates and entire days in bookstores. As my relationship with Gareth developed, I was more than ready to leave the pink house. I wanted to indulge my quiet, serious side. I wanted to live with the person I slept with most of the time, not with my best friends and three other people who might crash out on the floor after returning

from a sailboating trip in Australia. I was embracing the giving-up of girlhood that commitment to a partner necessitates. I wanted a higher ratio of stability in my life.

Astrid supported my need for a different environment and, I might add, my relationship with Gareth (before the wedding announcement). However, after her reaction to my impending nuptials, I spent less time with her, instead viewing myself as more of a gender-conscious girl-power feminist. In the face of her criticism, it was simply easier for me to be on the side of personal choice—the same kind of argument used to support breast implants or a stripping career unequivocally.

Couple my own political ambivalence about the institution of marriage (though not the man with whom I was entering it) with Astrid's uncanny inability to let sleeping feminist dogs lie, and there's gonna be trouble in Friendship City. My ambivalence goes back not only to my own experiences as a child of a divorce and a bitter (is there any other kind?) custody battle, but also to effective feminist and gay rights arguments against marriage. Though I believe, as do other lefty married friends, that avoiding something (marriage) will not effect political change of that thing (e.g., legalizing marriage for gays and lesbians), it still brings up some sticky ethical issues. Would those of us having alterna-Unitarian ceremonies with vows taken from Thich Nhat Hanh feel as comfortable toasting everlasting love with marijuana brownies by the beach if interracial marriage were outlawed? How about if adopting a husband's name were still a prerequisite? Why would anyone want to take part in a ritual originating in the notion of women as property to be passed from the father to the husband?

The logical objections to marriage are many, and I am not willing to answer those objections with an "I did it because I love him" non sequitur. Although marriage is an ethically shaky proposition, I was going through with it anyway. At a practical level, we had to do the legal thing to stay together. (Without citizenship, Gareth's visa issues would have constrained our mobility—of central importance in the academic job market.) This puts me in a precarious position. Marriages that have as their *only* purpose a green card can pass feminist analytical muster because they are a trick on the legalized system of heterosexual privilege. I didn't have this excuse, because I do love Gareth and am committed to

sticking to this relationship through poverty, illness, boredom, temptation and differences in decorating tastes (there's still a bit of pomo pink-house hippie girl in me that wants to paint each wall in our apartment a different color). Gareth is my partner, the person with whom I see myself raising a kid and growing old. Though he is cynical and sometimes awkward in social situations, he loves me with a patience and joy that still knocks me out. I knew how easy it was to leave an otherwise good relationship because of boredom or crushes, and frankly, I was tired of that. I didn't think Gareth would make all those feelings go away (a mistake I think a lot of serial monogamists make), but he is someone I want to force myself not to run from when the going gets tough. I like the idea of a covenant, a promise that makes it just a little bit harder to walk away from something so good. So while I can say that I got married for legal purposes, I still did it for love.

Thus, I had no rejoinder to those who might criticize marriage, except for a version of "I agree, and I don't want to talk about it." I like to debate issues, not personal dilemmas, which always seem beyond the grasp of much theorizing. I don't strive or expect to understand other people's decisions, but Astrid almost always does. I sometimes find myself feeling like a flabby and overly ambivalent feminist around her. She is a difficult-to-attain ideal of feminist ethics—a supermodel, if you will—whereas while I know very well why I spend too much money or make out with a local band member in a rusty Toyota Tercel at two-thirty in the morning the week my dissertation proposal is due, I do it anyway. It's not that Astrid doesn't understand this; she just expects me to theorize it when the only thing I want to do is bury my hungover head into the pillow and pretend everything is fine. Or go shopping. Or get married.

With Astrid, I couldn't argue my way out of a paper bag and began to resent that I even had to try. When we would go out, we tried to talk (albeit awkwardly) about other things, until she found some way to insert a questioning of my motives in what often felt like an entirely roundabout way:

ME: I think I'll have a cinnamon roll with pecans; God, two-fifty for a roll seems pricey.

HER: Yeah, these alterna-cafes are just as pricey as Starbucks, but

they think because they sell additive-free cigarettes and hang up photos of motorcycles that they're actually different. Kind of like people who rewrite marriage vows to pretend they're not really participating in a system of heterosexual privilege, dontcha think?

Such confrontations continued off and on for months. I would argue that as a friend she had a responsibility to accept me unconditionally; she would argue that I couldn't expect her to accept something so clearly against the political beliefs we shared. Plus, she would rightly point out, I had almost all of society on my side, from *A Wedding Story* on cable TV to bridal registries, which encourage you to shop, shop, shop without paying for a thing.

It became harder and harder for me to spend time with Astrid. I was angry, of course, and I was also tired and conflicted about the decision. So it became a circle as vicious as a diamond-encrusted wedding band. See, not only was I getting married, but I was proving one of her main points: Marriage is designed to keep women at a distance from each other in favor of a more "serious", heterosexual bond, one you can't have with "just a friend." At the same time, Anna and Sarah became a refuge. Though Sarah had decided to move to San Francisco later that year, and Anna was forming new alliances with a group of community artists and performers, there was no doubt that they would attend the wedding and be supportive in every way. Sarah and Anna came up with a girly ritual to send me on my way involving alcohol, flower petals, three cut strands of my pubic hair and a version of "light as a feather, stiff as a board" where I was ceremoniously carried out onto the balcony in the middle of the night and accidentally burned on the back of my thigh with a curling iron (don't ask).

In the three years since the wedding, Sarah has moved, and she recently came back to visit with her baby son in tow. Carrying on the pink-house tradition, he is a fifteen-month-old bundle of smiles and flesh, completely dedicated to laughter and the appreciation of shiny and brightly colored objects. When I hung out with her again, it was like no time had passed. Just last weekend, Anna and I spent a wonderful Sunday repainting the pink house's window frames a dark forest green. The only argument we had was about color choice. "Isn't

pink and green kind of, well, an eighties preppy thing?" I wondered. She stamped her yellow rattan platform-sandaled feet and said, "Why should we give those colors to the preps? Monet invented this color combination at Giverny, so fuck that!" I still miss my time with them, and I hate getting older. It's not pre-nostalgia anymore.

Astrid and I still struggle along, our friendship combining awkward and angry moments along with intense and incredibly fulfilling confessions about our lives and our emotional motivations. Most recently, we went out for a drink after not seeing each other for a few months (due to geographic rather than emotional distance). I told her I was writing on this subject and that I couldn't remember when we stopped arguing about my decision. I couldn't for the life of me recall a final blowup, a door-slamming discussion. She said, "I think we just stopped arguing after you did it, after you got married."

My experience shows how intense female bonds embody a continuous struggle, rhetorically and emotionally—to get at the heart of being a feminist, and a friend. This piece began as an argument about marriage, but I realize it has ended up as a dedication. At its worst, marriage and its accompanying valorization of the heterosexual bond makes you take your friends lightly. We still have no official legal bonds or rituals honoring our commitment to friends. But at its best, marriage foregrounds how the self is identified in relationships to others, and not just with husbands and boyfriends. I bless my conflicts with these women and hereby dedicate my marriage to them. Though I don't know if marriage is a politically justifiable act, I am sure of how indelibly my friends make up the strange ball of desires and convictions that is me. My life with Gareth is a living monument to them, more vital than any dress wrapped up in cellophane. If I actually believed in such things, I would toast them with pink champagne and personalized matchbooks with the words "Anna, Astrid, Sarah and Jen, June 25, 2000."