

WEDLOCK  
(HEADLOCK,  
DEADLOCK),  
OR CAN  
A WOMAN  
COMMIT  
HERSELF  
WITHOUT  
GETTING  
HERSELF  
COMMITTED?



Why do you have to write about *that?* my

mother-in-law asks plaintively when I tell her I'm working on the section of my book that deals with marriage and the family. "What does that have to do with your subject? I thought you were writing about being a Catholic feminist."

"But, but," I stutter, "but I'm a *married* Catholic feminist."

"Well, yes, but I thought you were going to write about abortion and priesthood for women and things like that."

"Those too, of course. But

---

marriage is one of the sacraments. How could I just skip over it?"

"I still don't see what marriage has to do with what you're writing about." Her tone is both reproachful and dismissive.

Ah, of course. Because we haven't been together in several months, I'm rusty at the task of listening for her unspoken messages, but now I get this one. I've written about marriage before (although until now I haven't had George's permission to do so freely), and she's hated even my limited personal revelations, which she's hardly alone in finding indecent. A lifelong churchgoer herself, she doesn't really think marriage is totally unrelated to religious belief, or she wouldn't if she stopped to reflect. But her dread gets in the way of insight. *Not again!* she's telegraphing to me. *Don't give away any more of those terrible secrets!*

But how can I not re-explore this bond that has grounded my life since the moment, more than thirty years ago, when I began to dream of becoming George's wife? And I *did* dream of becoming George's wife, not of George's becoming my husband. From the outset I assumed the role of the wretch, the one who needed rescuing and perfecting, and marriage promised, in transforming me from Nancy Pedrick Smith to Nancy Pedrick Mairs, to make of me a new creature. This was, and has remained, the paradigmatic conversion, infinitely more powerful and penetrating than anything connected with exclusively religious conviction or practice. I might have found another way to God. I might have found a better way to God. But I did not. My spirit has been schooled in wedlock.

Perhaps no other avenue was open to a young woman in my social circumstances. My family went to church to find God, but we did not invite God home with us. Sometimes we invited the minister, but even that visit created a bit of a strain, what with the worry about whether or not cocktails could be served and the dread that the cats would copulate on their favorite

---

---

chair in the livingroom. Except for saying "Now I lay me down to sleep" with my baby brother and sister when we put them to bed and repeating the Lord's Prayer in unison before Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, we didn't pray in the house. Occasionally, at Sunday dinner as a rule, I'd introduce a religious subject, but these discussions tended to end badly when Mother's and Granna's conventional values collided with my adolescent iconoclasm. As for icons, our house certainly contained none of them (the seven surviving porcelain statues of the Eight Chinese Immortals and the wooden carving of Ho Tei, the Laughing Buddha, don't count, having had sentimental but no symbolic value).

Marriage, by contrast, whether in its absence or in its presence, permeated our daily lives. Although divorce was uncommon, Granna had been forced to undertake that unpleasant duty by Grandfather's bad behavior, about which I learned no details until after I was married; Garm and Pop, my father's parents, remained married, the strains in the union laboriously concealed from us children. For my mother, tragically widowed, everybody's fondest wish was remarriage. Although, with a child's devotion, I thought her perfect however she was, I could tell over time that she was thought deformed in some way, a kind of amputee, and my own life skewed and impoverished by her lack. When she remarried the fall after I turned eleven, I shared the relief of all her family and friends and looked forward to having a real life at last.

This marriage, together with my aunt's, in which I lived for days and later weeks at a time, constituted my model of normalcy, augmented by the flickering black-and-white stereotypes that permeated the consciousness of my generation perhaps more powerfully, certainly more generally, than any medium had been able to do before: "Leave It to Beaver," "Father Knows Best," "The Danny Thomas Show." . . . A lot has been

---

---

made of the discrepancies between these televised comedies and "reality"—black children watching all-white households, children of divorce observing only intact families, working-class children seeing mothers dole out milk, cookies, and tender advice after school—but what spooks me are the correspondences. I swallowed treacle and propaganda alike without a single skeptical gag because these depictions so nearly matched my own experience.

That that experience might be just as carefully manipulated as a television show I had little reason to suspect. The suicide of one grandfather and the alcoholism of the other may have been the most dramatic family troubles kept from me, but the general policy was to insulate children from all the details of adult relationships. Sometimes there were hints, of course, whispers and then, when you drew closer to make out what they were saying, a quick caution: "Little pitchers have big ears." But for the most part couples denied marital strains not just to children but to friends, other family members, and even each other. One elderly relative claims proudly that in fifty years of marriage she and her husband "never had a cross word," although her son has early memories of his father's raised voice and his mother's tears. The social face of marriage in our world was to remain as bland and smooth as that of a well-fed infant.



In August 1967 I was committed to Metropolitan State Hospital, suffering from severe depression and anxiety, I was told. I didn't know anything about that. I only knew that I felt as though I was about to jump out of my skin. I couldn't draw a full breath. I couldn't stop crying. Except in my husband's company, I couldn't leave our apartment, and there wasn't much point in leaving anyway, since I couldn't enter an office, a shop,

---

---

a restaurant, a theatre, a church. Only a mental hospital. That was the one place left for me.

By then, I'd been married a little over four years. My daughter was not quite two. I remained for slightly more than six months, during which I almost died once from swallowing an overdose of Darvon, had a flagrant affair with another inmate even looper than I, and received twenty-one electroconvulsive treatments. My psychotherapists focused on my confused and desperate emotional state rather than on intellectual or spiritual development. I was never educated about my condition. I was certainly never told that the world held others like me—young intense women terrified of flaw or failure—and because my background set me apart from most of the people confined with me, I didn't figure it out for myself. Nor did I make any connection between being committed to a state mental hospital and my earlier commitment, social and spiritual, to an airier but no less confining institution.

On the contrary, virtually all the elements of my experience conspired to obscure that connection. From earliest girlhood my notion of the consequences of marriage, though hazy, glowed with promise; I definitely did not suspect that they could include madness. And my treatment at Met State aimed at returning me, not so much transformed as resigned, to precisely the context in which I'd cracked up in the first place. I don't mean to suggest that marriage was the sole reason for my illness. And I especially don't mean to suggest that George personally and intentionally drove me nuts. George personally and intentionally held me fast with a stubbornness bordering on the nutty, at least by the standards of many who judge us, which is, I suppose, how he got the reputation of a saint, saintliness generally bearing a fanatical edge. The soul of John of the Cross struggled in its dark night. The flames of lust licked at Jerome's

---

---

heels (euphemistically speaking) as he fled into the desert. Stephen suffered stones; Sebastian, arrows; Bartholomew, the flaying knife. George married me.

But marriage turned out to be in its essence nothing personal. Rather, it took the form of a double helix replicating itself without regard for our particular histories and desires. We dreamed we were creating it ("can we ask any more than that we be set apart under the conditions of unity," I wrote to George during our engagement, "in order that we may effect this unity? What we create then is ours") and all the while it created us: Husband and Wife. Not Spouse and Spouse, mind you, but Husband and Wife, creatures whose differing privileges and responsibilities, imposed so immemorially as to have the force of nature, mocked that "unity" of my dreams, which is prescribed by canon law as one of the "essential properties" of marriage. Easier to unite a boa constrictor and a baboon (unless "swallowing whole" counts as "uniting"). We'd known nothing of the impersonal structure and force of wedlock at the outset, however, and our ignorance very nearly did us in.

Whenever we reflect on the period during which we were preparing a wedding, if not a marriage, George speaks in a tone at once amused and appalled: "Did you have any idea what marriage involved? What did you think it would be like?" I had probably given the matter a lot more thought than he, since girls were expected to, but I had no clearer idea; on the contrary, all that extra fantasizing had probably made me muzzier. In my surviving correspondence, the only concrete detail I report is that I acquired sets of measuring cups and yellow enamel saucepans, so I must have thought I was going to cook. Otherwise, I dreamed in the images in which month after month of the *Ladies' Home Journal* had instructed me: "a wedding and sleeping beside you each night and giving you children and a home

---

and being a kind of strength and shelter to you as you need me." Since I also read the *Journal's* column "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" I also feared "arguments and finding ourselves isolated emotionally from each other and the loss of a child and above all somehow destroying our love for each other."

The baby-faced icon of marriage beaming on us vacuously, we had no notion how to develop and work through arguments, how to reach across the fathomless rifts that would yawn without warning between us, how to ask for and offer comfort. We had measuring cups and yellow enamel saucepans in graduated sizes. Also more and more sterling silver candlesticks as the gifts began arriving. We had about an hour's talk with the minister, during which he counseled us how to avoid fighting about money, which we didn't have. We had between us forty-one years of earthly experience, divided not quite equally, one college degree and another on the way, a commission in the United States Navy, and two healthy libidos. We were going to get married.

What could "marriage" have signified? A legal contract? No, I had no experience with contractual relations; even my student loan hadn't yet fallen due. We had a church wedding, of course, everybody who wasn't pregnant did, but marriage couldn't have meant to me a sacrament in those days; Congregationalists have services or ceremonies but not sacraments. I could never have associated marriage with vocation, a word used only to mean a "job," for which I was quite carefully not being prepared since I would not, except perhaps briefly before marriage, ever work outside my home. I'm not sure I'd encountered the other kind of vocation, except possibly for ministers, who were all men, or missionaries, who were unimaginably remote. Attending college sixty miles from home had caused me enough agony to convince me that I was in no danger of being called to darkest

---

Africa and needn't even bother to keep my ears open. In any case, for Protestants neither ministry nor mission precluded marriage.

As for whether I might have been called to celibate life, well, the thought never crossed my mind. I don't mean I considered and discarded it, even glancingly, I mean it simply wasn't available to me in any form. One of the strongest anti-Catholic criticisms I heard growing up was that celibate priests presumed to dictate to married people on matters such as birth control and divorce which no experience had prepared them to understand. It was also one of the soundest. But it had the effect of constricting my idea of celibacy to a single negative point: Celibacy was not a spiritual option but an emotional defect in men. About women no one said anything at all, except to recount that my sister, seeing her first nuns, tugged at Mother's sleeve and cried out, "Look, Mummy, black ghosts!" We knew as little about them as we did about any ghosts.

Thus, I never went through the phase described by most of my Catholic women friends of contemplating "marriage to Christ" instead of to an earthly man. Some of them tell me I haven't missed much, that it's the sort of thing one gets over like other childhood infatuations, but I'm not sure that the possessor of an experience can ever quite appreciate its lack. Leaving aside perfervid adolescent piety, what I missed was the opportunity to consider single life an authentic choice. I might remain single, but I would do so only by default, as an "old maid," dedicating my shrunken life to whatever pursuits I could find to substitute, palely, for the husband and children fate had denied me. We pitied such women, the ones who for some reason (acting too smart was a particularly deadly one, but beating your boyfriend at bowling didn't help either) failed to get a man, we didn't revere them.

Stung by a friend's perspicacious comment that what I

---

---

wanted was to get myself safely and speedily married, to whom didn't seem to make much difference, I wrote to George a couple of months before our engagement: "if you were to go away, I would not want marriage at all. Not right away. I should want to live by myself, separate, perhaps finish school, get a job, be alone." *Not right away*. Singleness could be contemplated, but only as a temporary state, because I seemed "somehow 'predestined' for marriage (not in an ill-fated way, but by the influences of marriage and motherhood as a good life which I have always lived with)." *A good life?* I would say now: the only life. Whatever I thought marriage to be in formal terms, it afforded my single chance for happiness; when only one road opens through a wood of any color, you don't worry whether you've taken the right one. Behind me lay a lonely girlhood, marked by the loss of a father and the longing for an "ultimate" love to close that wound; ahead stood a skinny man in a morning coat with a sprig of stephanotis in the lapel, his dark eyes wide with what I chose to believe was adoration rather than terror, in whose company I would never feel abandoned again. I fled down that aisle—hoop swaying, ten-foot train rustling, illusion veil floating before my eyes—without a backward glance.



Marriage As Pageant: that's what I understood. The Bride and Groom Beside the Wedding Cake. The Newlyweds in Their First Home. The Proud Parents with Their First Child (A Fine Healthy Boy). Could I imagine beyond that point? Maybe, hazily: First Child's First Day at School, First Child's First Date, First Child's College Graduation, First Child's Wedding. . . . Because the machinery of the marriages I'd known had been curtailed so carefully, the future stretched out in silent and almost featureless tableaux, an iterative procession of Thanksgivings,

---

---

Christmases, Easters, Fourths of July, that peculiar mix of sacred and secular high holidays which had punctuated my childhood with one disappointment after another, all redeemed, transformed, perfected by George's presence.

The reality this vision obscured was Marriage As Process, not a state of wedded bliss (or, less thinkably, a slough of shattered dreams) but a sustained negotiatory association between two creatures who speak, at best, only pidgin versions of each other's language. I'm not referring here to theoretical linguistic differentiation according to gender, race, class, age, and so on; I have in mind the even more profound idiolectal differences that render each of us (except perhaps identical twins) capable of only the roughest sense of what on earth any other, no matter how beloved, is talking about. "I know exactly what you mean," we tend to say, trying through sympathy and good will to deny the slippage along the fault lines between us, the way we drift together and apart but never merge, our radical insular grief. To be honest, at least half the time I, for one, don't know exactly what I mean, much less what you mean. If I tell you I do, you will expect from me something I can never give: an end to being alone. Better I should tell you I know approximately what you mean. No, not even that. Better I should shut up and listen.

I had this information, at least in abstract form, a year before George and I married: "I want to say to you everything I am thinking and feeling, and I tell you as much as I can transpose to my tongue, but the inside of me is estranged from everyone, even you, and even when I think I can talk about something, it often becomes twisted around sound and syllable and I am faced with a real hopelessness." But here's where I went wrong: "I am sure you feel the same way." And wronger: "After we have been married for a long time, I suppose the problems of communication will be less severe." Maybe George felt the

---

---

same way, and maybe he didn't; I didn't know then, and I don't know now; but already I'd gotten into the habit of second-guessing his silences. And these would persist, disrupting communication worse than sunspots, for a longer time than I had yet been alive.

How many women have told you, "I thought after we were married he'd come home and we'd have a nice dinner, a little wine, and talk over the day, but instead he walks in and switches on the television and stares until bedtime"? Among women of my age and background, anyway, it's a complaint even more common than chronic fatigue syndrome. We might be willing to listen, but we believe we're supposed to have something to listen to: not silence, however companionable. Silence is a symptom, like a pinpoint rash or undulant fever. And every woman is a Florence Nightingale whose task is to make it go away. If you could attend one of our family gatherings, you'd hear just how thoroughly I was trained for this vocation. The din of female voices would daunt any plague of silence threatening to infect our community.

For most men I know, a sudden lull, although it may cause social discomfort, doesn't suggest personal failure as it does for many women, who develop in order to avoid it a variety of conversational strategies that would put any of Jane Austen's characters to shame. Until I rebelled against the prohibitions on sex, religion, and politics and dropped all pretense to polite discourse, my style tended toward what my brother-in-law calls *bibble*, and I still have an unfortunate fondness for interminable climatic disquisitions. George's mother's style instead takes the form of relentless interrogation. By the time I met him, twenty years of *Twenty Questions* had drained him of conversational initiative, leaving him terse and, at the first hint of reproach, slightly sullen. He held himself no more responsible for sustaining communication than he was for producing the *tunafish*

---

---

sandwich he ate for lunch or retrieving the dirty socks from under his bed.

In many ways George and I made a good match. He was two and a half years older and about four inches taller (the reverse in either case would have been frowned upon). We came from families of European background and similar socioeconomic status, although for Mother's peace of mind he should have been a Congregationalist (and I don't think she knew that his father was a Democrat and his mother an Independent). We went to private colleges, where we both majored in English literature. He preferred Baroque music and I preferred rock and roll, but he liked rock and roll and I liked Baroque music, and we were both crazy about Joan Baez. He was fonder of peanut butter than I but at least he didn't eat liver.

Nobody raised the question of linguistic compatibility. And since we were using roughly the same words in roughly the same order, it hardly seemed likely that my "I do" signified differently from his "I do." Only when my doctoral work led me to read in feminist, psychoanalytic, and linguistic theories did I begin to recognize that, in emotional terms, we'd spent a couple of decades shouting at each other in Urdu and Kikongo without a translator. In practical terms, however, there were few shouts: those still tableaux of my imagination tended to play themselves out in literal, awful silence which, I haltingly came to learn, has a grammar and a rhetoric of its own. What we fear, we are slowest to apprehend, and our stupidity makes us vulnerable.

George felt no fear of silence, and he had a repertoire of uses for it, all of which functioned to augment my anxiety until I became, ironically, speechless. Although he claims that his public silences occur only because he can't think of anything to say, they render him aloof in a manner unnerving even to people who aren't emotionally involved with him. "I always feel

---

---

like he's judging me," one of our friends once confided, "and I'm not coming off very well." Those of us who are close to him feel his implicit disapproval more strongly. "I'm never scared of you," my daughter told me some years ago with characteristic ego-deflating nonchalance. "You scream and yell but it's nothing. Dad just sits and *looks* and I feel terrible." No matter how benign his attitude, George can't have remained unaware of the power such Olympian silence can confer. He's the least dimwitted man I know.

And not, perhaps, wholly benign. Because I knew from the start (how? how?) that any failings in our relationship rested with me, I could not believe him capable of working us any harm; and so whenever our marriage sputtered and stalled like my old Volvo when the timing went off, I never scrutinized his behavior, only my own. Thus, when we stopped speaking, he could tell me that *I'd* stopped speaking, confident that I wouldn't trace the process back to the moment when, in response to a remark he'd perceived as critical of him, he had shut down absolutely, leaving me too panicked to know what to say. Time after time, I believed that he'd never talk to me again. The marriage was over. It was, each time, the way I imagined drowning to be: soundless but for the shrieks in my fading consciousness.

I've outgrown these anxiety attacks just as I've outgrown agoraphobia. That is, the symptoms still wash over me, and I hate and fear them as much as ever, but I've learned to float face-up until they ebb away again. I suggest to George, whether intentionally or by accident, that his behavior strikes me as flawed. Quiet descends, lasting as a rule no more than a few hours; we don't have days to squander anymore. We'll speak again before we reach the point of divorce. In the meantime, if any crucial information needs to be passed along, we can always tell the dog or the cats, to whom neither of us ever stops speaking, within each other's hearing. In households like ours subject

---

---

to disruptive lulls, pets are invaluable conduits. People with animal allergies might talk to their plants. Or pray aloud. "Oh God, the toilet has just overflowed and I can't find the plumber's helper. Did you happen to notice where George put it?"

One of the consequences of this susceptibility to silences has been a relationship relatively free of arguments. To the extent—and it's considerable, I think—that this quality has reflected amicability and pleasure in each other's company, it's been a pure blessing. All too often, however, until recent years, it arose from a refusal to risk the discomfort of full engagement. For George, in particular, argument was virtually impossible; he had no siblings to practice with, and his mother dissolves into tears and flees at the first hint of disagreement. Blessed and afflicted with a sister only twenty-one months younger, along with a mother and grandmother who sometimes fought with each other as well as us girls, I had plenty of practice. All the same, the behavior was formally prohibited. Whenever our howls (accompanied on occasion by a bite or a clang on the head with a cast-iron frying pan) escalated to an intolerable din, Sally and I were admonished not to argue rather than instructed how to do it right.

No wonder George and I made a botch of it: I carrying on with the rhetorical extravagance of a girl raised among articulate women, seizing and worrying a subject the way my terrier used to tug and growl at his chew toys; George sneering at my agitation and hyperbole but disdaining to touch the subject at all. "But that's not the point," I'd wail when he accused me of hysteria or exaggeration. "Rhetoric isn't the *point*. Oh, why won't you engage with me?" On May 3, 1985, during a counseling session, he answered: "Because I'm afraid I'll lose." Of course. Why had I been so stupid? Perhaps because I had been raised among women. For me argument had been a means for self-assertion—"giving someone a piece of my mind," we'd called

---

---

it—rather than a pitched battle which could only result in the "death" of one side or the other. Socialized in the tradition of male ceremonial combat, as Walter J. Ong has called it, George saw me not as a sister or a mother, an other beloved even if at this instant he could cheerfully brain her with the handiest skillet, but as an opponent to be vanquished, and unless he could be sure of "winning," he preferred not to contend at all. By attacking my argumentative style, he diverted attention from the matter between us, and soon we subsided again "safely" into silence.



But, even leaving out our interminable reiteration of these communicative lurches and lapses, was this anything like "marriage" we were saving? In this regard, social and religious attitudes offered little insight, since these focused on the Pageant, which unfolded satisfactorily, on the whole. We produced babies, their genders the wrong way round but one of each, and although we seemed to have married for poorer rather than richer, we made enough money to provide them the elements of a shabby but stable childhood: crumbling houses, second-hand cars, good medical care though no braces for their teeth, library cards, puppies and kitties and bunnies and guinea pigs and some really terrific snakes, back-to-school clothes, a fir tree every Christmas, even a couple of trips to Disneyland. Early on, we sometimes drank too much and smoked a little dope, but we were generally sober, reliable, and polite in company, confining our disagreements behind closed doors. I must have been thirty-five before I got my first, and only, traffic ticket; we weren't arrested for civil disobedience until we were both in our forties.

Of course, there were bad patches—some of them as bad as those potholes in Zaïre capable of swallowing whole trucks,

---



---

whose roofs become part of the roadbed—but we picked our way across them with as little public fuss as possible. Other people decently averted their eyes whenever they could (as far as I can tell, George's parents got through my six-month sojourn at Met State without breathing a word about it to anyone) or complimented us on our ability to cope with affliction. I don't see how they could have responded otherwise. Pageantry forces an audience into silence and distance.

But as for the Process, spinning out darkly beneath this burnished surface, oh, I was unhappy in it, stricken with grief and guilt for my unhappiness, and unspeakably lonely. I had vowed in front of God and everybody to love and cherish a man of my own choice forever, and I couldn't make good. "I loved this man more than any other person I've ever known," I wept after nine years of marriage. "How could I have stopped? How can I now recoil from his touch? How can he make me feel angry and bitter and bleak instead of full and joyous? Where did it go for God's sake where did it go?" No one had ever suggested to me that "love and cherish" meant "love and cherish on the whole" or "for the most part" or "more often than not" or even "in fits and starts." That much, I found out over the years, I could manage—"the marriage is dead now, of course, but I've lived in it long enough to know that death and resurrection form its characteristic process," I finally realized at about the zillionth such death—but I never believed it was enough, and although I never again had to be locked up, my inconstancy tormented me almost to madness for years to come.