2007 First Place Personal Narrative

Diamond-Encrusted Ring Around the Rosie

Last week, at a small post office just off campus, two out of the ten people in line clutched a bundle of invitations to mail. I bet they were wedding announcements. Or baby announcements. Regardless, neither of the envelope-clutchers was over twenty-five years old. It was the kind of thing I have already learned to expect from living in Utah.

Although the inordinately young marriage age of the Mormon culture is a known and accepted epidemic, it has never felt quite right for me. Sitting at receptions where teenagers had just played basketball the day before, I would repeatedly gaze in ambivalent amazement at the almost adolescent couples who looked like they could attend a stake dance in the very room mere weeks away. I would marvel at the love and happiness they (seemingly) shared. But I would also shake my head at how unbearably young they were—how inexperienced and immature. Fools.

Cold, draining screams. Impassioned, hateful—a fire that consumed all breath and left a vacuum in the house. I can see myself, a skinny seven-year-old, in the room. Then at the top of the stairs. An eyewitness.

“I hate you! Stupid, stupid—you’re so stupid! Baca-mon!”

Unfettered, rapid Japanese—all in her native tongue. Screeching and gnashing and burning. She knew him well enough to say what hurt him most. His worst faults, insecurities. Every mistake he had made. Silent raging, that was the worst. She would lose her mind, but he would smolder quietly. Every word, every syllable, every silent breath pierced me in places so deep I could never remove the arrows.
Shattered glass, enraged muttering. More screaming—screaming on both sides. Shaking uncontrollably, my mom impulsively grabbed objects from the counter, the table, throwing them at the floor, the wall, at him. She was on the floor.

“I should never have married you! If we ever fight again, we’re getting a divorce—I’m leaving!”

I crept to my room and shut the door as tightly as I could. I shoved it harder against the frame, just to make sure. I crawled into my soft bed and clutched my knees up to my chin and buried myself beneath pillow and blanket. I cried for hours until I fell asleep in exhaustion. This was the worst that it had been.

I heard the other day that seventy-five percent of BYU students marry by the age of twenty-two. This is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life. There is a girl in my building—a freshman dorm!—who is already engaged. It is the second week of school. I see pregnant girls pushing strollers across campus. A college student and a mother?! Am I the only one who sees this and wants to scream? We’re just kids! There should be a ban on marriages before the age of twenty-six. Or twenty-eight. Some of these boys who are getting married look pubescent! And the girls like high school babysitters.

Another glacial night of wreckage. She was an expert shrieker; the neighbors must have talked. She was always articulate—at least she was articulate. She embodied intellectual insanity, a controlled lunacy in verbal form. Ever prepared with an artillery of insult and blame, she blazed in bloody glory. His response began as motionless seething; he was devastatingly frightening when he exploded.

She left. The engine roared and the tires screeched. The dark, icy air blew through the panes of glass. My dad made us dinner. It tasted like burned rubber. I wondered if she would come back.

The following evening, or the one after, she and I were alone in the kitchen. Sitting at the table, fiddling with my empty bowl and dirty fork, I gathered all the strength left in my body. Timidly, I ventured to ask, “Mom?” A beat. I whispered, “Are you and Dad getting divorced?”

Surprised, my mom looked at me with a chuckle. She laughed. “Nani? What?”

“Are you and Dad getting divorced?”

Clearly amused, she quipped, “Why do you ask that?”
Bewildered and embarrassed, I quietly responded, “You said that if you fought again, you would divorce.”

Oh, you poor, naïve fool, her eyes patronized. “Of course not.” Of course not.

Returned missionaries amuse me. These twenty-one-year-olds, fresh faces in the dating scene, eager to find their eternal companion and the end of their embargo on carnal attraction, are desperate to date as many girls as they can get to say yes. First it’s “yes,” then “I do,” then it’s baby and family and eternity—do they feel that they missed anything in life? Within months or, for the more daring (or hasty), weeks, of their return home, these young men miraculously find their soul mates.

My mom was twenty when she married my dad. He was seven years her senior, and a returned missionary. They met at church when they were both living in Japan. I don’t know too much about their lives when they were young; my parents have never been big storytellers. Periodically, I wonder what their courtship was like, but I shy from asking. I guess I don’t really want to know.

I’m the oldest of four now, and my youngest sister, who is nine, has never had to witness my parents attacking each other—not once. Lisa is happier than I was, I think. She still kisses my mom good night before she goes to bed. I stopped when I was four. Lisa is a chatterbox, constantly talking about school, her friends, and her Disney Channel shows. I stopped talking to my mom when I was eight. My mom protects her baby—especially with two ruthless brothers in the house. Lisa is wrapped in rabbit fur, stowed in a snug carriage. My juvenile equivalent, a ghost of years ago, stands beside her in camel skin.

I have little faith in love. Love is work, a decision. Love is companionship, routine. Love is livability, survival. Love is what happens when you spend so much time with someone that the two become one, that the two lives converge to the same heartbeat. Love is friendship, familiarity. Love is not love. Love is loneliness.

I watch them interact like a black and white movie. I am in the back row of the theatre in the living room, while they sit after dinner at the table. He laughs as she animatedly relates an amusing experience she had had earlier in the day. They discuss what movie they want to go see later in the evening. Smiling amicably, both are natural and happy where they are. They are both older now. They are finally adults. They were not my mother and my father when I was seven. They were an older sister and brother who took care of me as a baby.
They were kids, petty and misunderstanding. Selfish. They have aged to contentment. I have been aging for a lifetime.