

“I choose my husband again, and again, despite our childlessness”

By Sylvie Beauvais

[The Mother Should website is now defunct, so here's my essay anyway.]



In June, I went sea kayaking in a bio-luminescent bay in Puerto Rico with my husband. We shared a two-seater kayak: he sat in the front of the boat and I sat in the back. There were other couples in other boats. As the sun set, we navigated the mangrove in the near total dark guided by the tiny amber lights at the sterns and bows, marking our group of boats. This seemed like the ultimate metaphor for marriage—navigating by faith, in the dark, with partial information, but with the support of a chosen companion.

Neither of us had ever been in a sea kayak. In the dark. In a bay. Surrounded by other uncertain boaters. All of us in couple formation. As sometimes happens in group settings, it was remarkably easy to make snap judgments about the other couples navigating the waters and their way of paddling together.

I could see couples with power struggles—one partner dominating. There were couples that couldn't coordinate their paddling, their boats getting stuck in the low hanging mangrove trees. There was one boat where the man ignored his resigned wife's cries and the directions of our guides, speeding ahead, somewhat out of control, constantly ramming other boats. Some boats moved slowly, but worked well together.

What my husband couldn't see was that our paddling strokes were even and perfectly synced, that we were moving in harmony better than any other couple sharing a boat in our group. We both have broad shoulders, and now I realized our arms were the same length, so our paddles reached the water at the same time. We were moving quickly and efficiently, harmoniously, and he didn't know. Another metaphor for marriage: each partner has different information about why the couple works or doesn't work.

Ours is a childless marriage. My husband set this boundary to our relationship. What follows are my struggles. My husband is a private man which I will do my best to honor here.

At four am in Washington DC, our first sleepless night in a friend's guest room, I turn to my husband and want to ask him a question I have never previously envisioned through all our conversations about children.

"Honey, I have a hard question to ask you and you don't have to answer right now."

"I'm not in the best mood." We have spent several uncomfortable hours tossing and turning in a strange bed.

I know my timing's not great, "Okay, I won't ask."

My husband is patient with me, he breathes in and then exhales. He says, "You can ask."

"If you knew I wanted children, why did you stay?"

I'm turned towards him in bed and he is looking up at the ceiling. His face is in shadow. My arm is draped over his chest. He says nothing for a few breaths, thinking. I consider what I know about us. I answer for him, "I think the short answer is that we love each other."

He turns towards me and says "Yes, and I guess I felt it was your decision to make, whether to stay or go."

In the moment I feel the sadness he must have felt, not knowing what I would choose. But this exchange also reminds me how inconceivable the choice to go has always seemed--how once my heart opened to this beautiful partner, it felt impossible to go. I lay in the bed a little sad, but also feeling the wholeness of my love: how large and generous the experience of loving him makes me feel.

After a moment of silence, he turns to me, looks at me and says, "That's a nice hat." I'm wearing my sleep mask on my forehead.

I answer, "It's the required fashion accessory for sleepless nights."

He says, "It's true, I have noticed the actors wearing it in all the ads for sleepless nights."

We laugh together and the sadness fades, and all I can feel is his chest hair tickling my forearm as he breathes and his warm leg along mine. In the moment what I feel is the certainty that I am in love, and it suffices; it feels vast. After I write about this exchange, I share the text with him and we cry together, holding each other tenderly.

We have had many conversations over many years. When I met him he was ambivalent and I was neutral to positive on children; I was a little unsure. My desire for children always hinged on finding a partner who was enthusiastic about the idea. Forcing someone ambivalent to have children is to me ethically repugnant and deeply unfair to both partner and imaginary child.

In our years together, I kept hoping his ambivalence would resolve and the vastness of our love would answer his questions and make him curious. No one moment felt like the decisive moment where the conversation about children ended. I stayed a little blindly hopeful and he was steadfast. During all that time in conversation, our love grew. As our love grew, we also got older. Thirty-eight when we met, I am now 44, closer to 45, and from a fertility standpoint the question is essentially moot. I never wanted the path of medical intervention for procreation. In the heat of our discussions after I had moved in, when I was 40 or 41, I tried to imagine leaving, finding a new partner, falling in love and trying to get pregnant. I thought that this path would be time a consuming gamble: by the time New Partner might be ready to commit to parenting, my

fertility would be unsure. And then, as today, letting go of this love was inconceivable. Love is partly timing.

When I found myself praying to Aphrodite for a partner seven years ago when I was 37, I did not know that I would receive exactly what I asked for: the love of my life. Our childlessness is the most difficult choice I have ever made. I am deeply in love and also frequently (but bearably) in pain wishing our relationship could encompass parenting. It is a delicate, excruciating tension. I embrace the joy and fulfillment of being partnered with someone I deeply respect, truly enjoy, and with whom I share ecstasy, intellectual stimulation, and travel. We continue our conversation. The person who causes me the most existential tension (my loving husband who doesn't want kids) is the person who comforts me through my tears and helps me laugh. Despite its sorrows, the mantle of our love sometimes feels magical, both protective and reparative.

The choice to stay, to love, to share my life with this person is made anew with varying frequency. I make the choice again and again, knowingly, in regret and in celebration. My husband's definition of parenting is narrower than mine. I would parent by any means possible, fostering included. I do not require a biological offspring where he would. This gives me more options and I have considered them. Yet, I do not leave and go find a divorcee with children so I can step-mom.

The choices I embrace are to be my spouse's partner, and to spend time with all the young mothers in my circle. Living with children in my life, but not my children, sometimes renews my grief but also gives me the joy of children's company. I previously spent some time as a child therapist, so for a childless woman I am unusually comfortable around kids, and enjoy their humor, curiosity and tenderness. Parents often notice, and frequently remark upon, my ease with children. Each comment tugs at the old familiar twinge in my heart. Then I go about the business of enjoying the moment and being present with the children. This weekend I was introduced to Ever After High characters by an enthusiastic six year old. She wanted me to help her find the evil queen's lost shoe. At the end of each day with children, I go home with my husband. I enjoy the quiet. I might shed some tears. But I get a sound night sleep.

I'm not sure how all of this will play out in the end, the subtle wear and tear on my marriage. But I also feel writing this essay has helped me heal my heart, say what needed to be said, look clear eyed at the past, how I made the choices that brought me to this moment.

I keep rowing in the dark watching my husband's graceful movements--so grateful for his presence. Sometimes, the grief is small, light as a feather, and sometimes it is a tornado. The tornadoes have been fewer lately. Writing helps. Feather or tornado, I love my husband and continue to be nourished by the wonder of this primary relationship.