



Dodge that bouquet

Raising the bar on marriage

BY WENDY DENNIS

My daughter's at that stage where her friends are beginning to marry. Last summer, on her way to a friend's wedding, she stopped by my place to drop something off. "Have fun," I said. "And don't forget to dodge that bouquet." *

Counselling my daughter to bouquet-dodge may not be the most conventional motherly advice, but in these maritally challenged times, somebody has to keep their wits about them.

It's not that I'm cynical about marriage. I believe, as author Joseph Barth observed, that "marriage is our last, best chance to grow up." (By marriage, I mean any committed intimate partnership.) There are some things you can learn in a marriage that you just can't learn anywhere else. Unfortunately, for a lot of couples, misery is increasingly one of them.

In 1999, according to the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University's annual review of marriage, only 38 per cent of Americans in their first marriage described themselves as "actually happy" in their situation. Over the past two decades, the percentage of people who see themselves as happily married has been on a persistent downward spiral. In the Project's 2001 review, more than half of the 1,000 or so single and married twentysomethings surveyed said they saw so few good or happy unions that they questioned marriage as a way of life.

Under the circumstances, you could call bouquet-dodging a bold, defensive move.

A truly happy marriage is a thing of beauty – but a phenomenon so rare that when one streaks across the sky, it behooves us to pay close attention.

Which brings me to the storied union of Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft, who, by all accounts, had the kind of marriage that makes you want to run out and book the caterer. When Bancroft died last year, Rebecca Traister wrote a nuanced portrait of their marriage on Salon.com. What emerged was a



joyful yet refreshingly unsentimental view of what marriage is, and a mature insight into what it really means to find your match.

Married more than 40 years, they had a son and forged brilliant careers working independently and together in films such as *To Be or Not To Be*, *Blazing Saddles* and *The Graduate*, which were among the most iconic of their generation. They met, according to one account, when Brooks saw Bancroft rehearsing a musical number called "Married I

Can Always Get" for *The Perry Como Show* and introduced himself by shouting "I'm Mel Brooks" from offstage. According to another, he paid a stagehand to tell him where Bancroft ate lunch so he could "accidentally" bump into her.

Bancroft once told a reporter that after meeting Brooks she told her shrink, "Let's speed this process up – I've met the right man." The fact that he made her laugh until she had to be sedated may have had something to do with it. In any event, she knew her prince had come: "I'd never had so much pleasure being with another human being," she said. "I wanted him to enjoy me, too. It was that simple."

Could there be a lovelier synopsis of simpatico?

On the *Today Show*, Gene Shalit once asked Bancroft if she loved her husband. She paused. "I think at a certain point in a marriage, the word *love* doesn't mean anything anymore," she said. Well, what did she feel for her husband? "Contempt!" cracked Brooks, who was sitting beside her.

"Well, yes, sometimes," Bancroft laughed.

Was she content in her marriage? Bancroft stared at Shalit, aghast. "I'm more than content! When I hear his key in the lock at night my heart starts to beat faster. I'm just so happy he's coming home. We have so much fun."

When I hear his key in the lock at night my heart starts to beat faster. That, my friends, is a marriage.

Another liaison guaranteed to inspire marriage envy was the 36-year union of Calvin and Alice Trillin. Alice died in 2001. Last >

“Marriage is our last, best chance to grow up.”

March in *The New Yorker*, Trillin wrote a luminous portrait of their marriage. It made you laugh and weep and wonder at the places that a marriage brushed by magic can go.

Alice, who was a writer, educator, television producer and the mother of their two daughters, appeared frequently as a character in Trillin's writing. He depicted her as the voice of reason, the centre of gravity – George Burns to his Gracie Allen, as many, including Trillin himself, observed. In real life, she was a rather more complicated creature – but always, through Trillin's eyes, beautiful and accomplished and divine. He confessed he'd spent his entire married life trying to impress her. That simple admission killed me more than anything else he wrote. Imagine being married to someone for 30-odd years who still wants to slay a dragon for you, who inspires you, day after day, to be the sort of person worth slaying a dragon for. Where do you go once you've known a love like that?

In his work, Trillin's love for Alice leapt so exuberantly off the page that, after she died, he received a condolence letter from a young woman in New York who said she sometimes looked at her boyfriend and thought, *But will he love me like Calvin loves Alice?*

But will he love me like Calvin loves Alice?

It's a fair question – the only one

worth asking, really, if you want a marriage like the Trillins', even though a marriage like theirs is almost impossible to imagine today.

You can blame the demise of the Trillin model on the collapse of civilization as we know it, reality television or Tom Cruise and intergalactic body thetans. But at a certain point you have to accept that even if you hire a husband whisperer, feed the homeless and wear your underwear inside out for good luck, one day your marriage could be hijacked by aliens. Did Jennifer Aniston ever think she'd wake up one morning to find her soulmate lugging an adopted daughter around Namibia in a Rasta sock-hat?

Like life, marriage can be exotic, maddening, banal, wondrous or absurd. It can make you feel sublime, or it can make you feel suffocated and murderous. About the only thing you can say about it with any certainty is that you never know where it's going. You may think you do, but you don't. You're deluded.

The other important thing to remember about marriage is that not everyone needs a first-class ride. Marriages, like cars, come in many models, and some people do just fine with a Ford Focus. But if it's a Rolls-Royce you crave, I'd tape that young woman's words to the bathroom mirror. Because if he won't love you like Calvin loved Alice, when you see that bouquet, dodge that sucker and run like hell.