

For Better Or Worse, Indelibly

People sometimes talk about long-married couples being as comfortable together as a pair of old shoes. That's nice, but in my experience marriage is a different sort of attire: a suit that you both wear and wear and wear, and it gets thin in the seat and frayed at the collar and cuffs, and some stains wash out and others don't. But you continue to wear it because the cut still basically suits you, no matter how often your partner draws attention to the grease marks.

Sometimes those stains arrive in the strangest ways.

Our friend Bob's father lives in a neighborhood with 37 bars, 35 of which he usually samples after work. That's about one bar for every year of his marriage. (I'm not suggesting, of course, that there's any correlation.) This is apt to make him a bit testy at dinner.

One evening he flipped a supposedly underdone hamburger up at the kitchen ceiling, where it stuck for a while before plummeting into the jello. Ever since, the minute he starts grouching at mealtime, his wife smiles a knowing little smile

and slowly inclines her head, as if toward rapture. Bob's father could now be president of a temperance society and that grease stain, long since sponged away, would still be on his ceiling metaphorically.

As years go by in a relationship, indiscretions take on the character of original sin. No haj or act of contrition seems to erase them. Even if your partner isn't especially vindictive, the right circumstances can trigger an almost Pavlovian response.

Whenever I question Marsha's taste in movies, she immediately counters by broaching Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Unaware of what a downer flick it was, I once took her to see this aboriginal ax murder revenge parable at a local college film society. The print was so bad it looked like hordes of locusts were flying across it. Never mind that we've since seen scads of fine movies at my recommendation. I could be on the Cannes jury every year and my cinematic taste would still be impugned by *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that partners generally, let alone my own sugar-booger, spin themselves into a Sufic trance trying to get the drop on each other. Merely that certain unfortunate incidents of an extreme nature acquire archetypal significance over time. They become like relationship rosetta stones, referenced again and again no matter how remote the original circumstances.

Sometimes, even time itself functions this way. Marsha and I have vastly different attitudes toward it. In my hands it becomes like Salvador Dali's soft watches, pliant and gooey, whereas she treats it like an air traffic controller, believing that being a nanosecond late automatically qualifies you for the stocks. Personally, I fail to see why you should get to a kid's birthday party on time when, most likely, the parents are still in a back bedroom wrapping Blo-Pens. Unfortunately, because of one exceptional instance of tardiness, my opinions on punctuality count for nought.

Full disclosure: it wasn't so long ago when, if I showed up on time for something, the nearest governing body would call a press conference. I was late so often for school that, contrary to my transcripts, I actually held myself back two grades. It helped keep my weight down, because there was never any food left when I got to parties and I usually wound up walking everywhere after missing my ride. But women hated it. Those who stuck around long enough, anyway, to arrive at ball games in the bottom half of the first. It never occurred to me that the only time coming late was appreciated was back at her place or mine.

With one exception, I was never *that* late. But that once I was 2 1/2 hours late for a picnic with Marsha and her family. I was arguing with my first wife over the Visa bill after she'd charged a

Lamborghini, and the argument became a chess match. By the time I arrived even the ants were into the Bromo Seltzer.

Never mind that one of my in-laws is usually so behind with meal prep that we eat before going over for dinner, or that I've since cleaned up my time act to where I no longer even have ushers for acquaintances. When it comes to letting go of this issue, Marsha is into Crazy Glue. Not even a pilgrimage to Big Ben, I suspect, would put time on my side.

The one redeeming thing about these grease spots is, they're shiny. Paradoxically, this makes them an incentive to stay married. Because if you're together long enough, eventually there will be so many of them that you'll think you're wearing sharkskin. That beats a pair of old shoes any day.