

SANDY DAYS, SALTY NIGHTS

The marriage myth?

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In his novel, "Little Children" (later made into a film starring Kate Winslet and Jennifer Connelly), author Tom Perrotta satirizes the banalities of modern marriage. He examines the shallow threads linking Prom King husband Brad and his exquisitely beautiful wife Kathy, the unfolding affair between frumpy but spunky Sarah and Brad, and the burgeoning preference of Sarah's husband, Richard, for online liaisons and mail-order (pre-worn) panties.

For all of its satirical humor (Sarah walking in on Richard with a another woman's underpants draped over his face, asking, "Is this going to take much longer? I'd really like to go for my walk."), there is a sense of resignation in the novel, a chalky aftertaste that suggests most marriages will end in an ashy demise. With divorce rates in the U.S. hovering between 40-50 percent, Perrotta's grim image is not entirely off target.

This sense of matrimonial fatalism has wormed its way into the American dating psyche. People fear a lifetime spent with one person and the relentless encroachment of tedium. Some have ducked out of the race entirely, preferring singledom to wedded boredom.

My friend Anna, an Ivy League educated journalist who loves fine cuisine and stiletto heels, has decided to stay out of marriage all together. Not enough excitement, she says, and she doesn't have the patience for the upkeep.

Upkeep? I wondered, until a friend told me about the level he had reached with his wife. In the mall parking lot, she pointed out the wayward nose hairs inching their way out of his proboscis. Reflexively, he covered his nostrils, embarrassed.

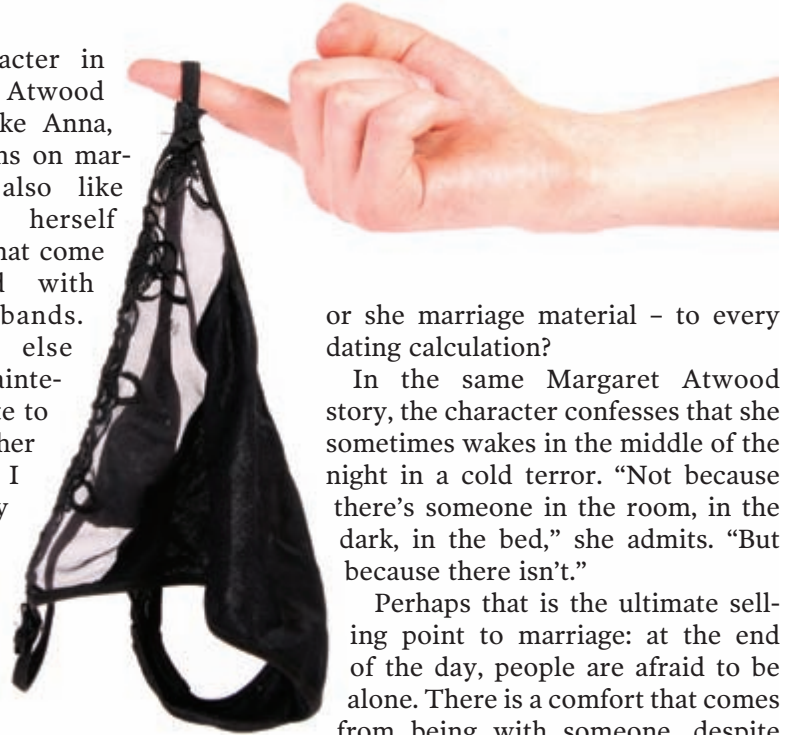
"Don't worry about it," she said. She pulled a pair of tweezers out of her purse. "I'll take care of them." Right there under the fluorescent lights of the concrete parking garage, surrounded by Suburbans and beige sedans, she set to work on his personal grooming.

"That's the virtue in married men,"

... Sarah walking in on Richard with a another woman's underpants draped over his face, asking, "Is this going to take much longer? I'd really like to go for my walk."

says a character in a Margaret Atwood story that, like Anna, has no designs on marriage and, also like Anna, finds herself dating men that come pre-equipped with wedding bands. "Someone else does the maintenance." (I hate to speak for other women, but I can definitely understand her way of thinking. It sometimes takes all the fun out of a relationship when you see a man cutting his toenails. Or have to help him trim his back hair.)

Yet, for all of the nay-saying, there must be something to wedlock. Otherwise, why would it be the end-goal of nearly every relationship? The make-or-break deciding factor - is he



or she marriage material - to every dating calculation?

In the same Margaret Atwood story, the character confesses that she sometimes wakes in the middle of the night in a cold terror. "Not because there's someone in the room, in the dark, in the bed," she admits. "But because there isn't."

Perhaps that is the ultimate selling point to marriage: at the end of the day, people are afraid to be alone. There is a comfort that comes from being with someone, despite the occasional dullness of domestic life. Monotony - and monogamy - can drone out its own peaceful rhythm. ■

Contact Artis

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